HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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13 May 2019
Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals Process

1. Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What progress her Department has made in improving the appeals process for disability living allowance. [910831]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity to meet him recently and reassure him that I am committed to looking into this area. I want to do and want my Department to do more to make sure we gather more information earlier so there is less need to go to tribunals and, where there is a need to go to tribunals, the amount of time people have to wait is reduced.

Mr Davis: I have a constituent, Susan Hatton, with an eight-year-old daughter, Jessica. Jessica suffers from achondroplasia; she cannot wash herself, dress herself or brush her own hair; she frequently falls over, is regularly on concussion watch and wakes up several times every night. Her mother needs help. In August, Jessica’s DLA was withdrawn despite her condition worsening. While an appeal was ongoing, the Department recommended she put in a second claim to hope for a better outcome. Eight months after that, they went to court and the judge said that because the second proposal was in play, he could not answer on the first one. So not only did my constituent have to wait an unduly long time for her appeal to be heard, but she now finds herself facing the entire process over again. Every month’s delay in fixing this problem is another month of deprivation, distress and uncertainty in very young lives. I know the Secretary of State is committed to correcting this problem, but I urge her to spend whatever it takes to do this as quickly as possible.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising such an important case, and I am very sorry to hear of the circumstances he has set out today. I have set up a new process for listening to MPs about particular cases; I now have a surgery open to all MPs about a week after having oral questions, and if he wants to come along and discuss that case, or of course have a separate meeting about it, I will certainly do that.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): The Secretary of State will have heard of Stephen Smith, because I wrote to her about him a couple of weeks ago. Stephen Smith was found fit for work, and by the time he went through the appeals system, he was obviously dying. He died shortly after the Secretary of State’s Department’s decision was overturned. What lessons does she draw from the tragic circumstances of this Merseysider, and when is she going to reply to my letter asking for an inquiry?

Amber Rudd: That is another very sad case. I have got the right hon. Gentleman’s letter and will be replying to it, and we will be looking very carefully at what can be learned from that example.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I have a constituent who has now waited a year for a DLA appeal, having previously waited a year for a successful appeal. She is a
chronically disabled teenage girl and faces endless errors in the Department and constant demands for more information and more signatures, and she has come to the conclusion that the Department has engaged in deliberate foot-dragging, not merely incompetence. What assurance will she have that thousands of cases like this, including the ones we have just heard, will be dealt with more expeditiously in the future?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are spending more money and investing more effort to make sure we get the decision right first time. I am working very closely with the Ministry of Justice, which is recruiting additional people to make sure there is less of a wait for the tribunal. I know how distressing that wait can be, and I am determined to reduce that time.

In-work Poverty

2. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of in-work poverty. [910833]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): There is clear evidence that work offers people the best opportunity to get out of poverty, and we now see record numbers of people in work. But it is not enough just to have a job; we want people to have good jobs and to progress in their work. And last month, this Conservative Government increased the national living wage, work allowances on universal credit and the personal tax allowance, providing the biggest pay rise to the lowest earners in 20 years.

Bridget Phillipson: I did listen to the Secretary of State’s answer, but she will know that around two thirds of children growing up in poverty have at least one parent in paid work. Work is simply not a straightforward route out of poverty for far too many families. Will she look again at the current levels of the work allowance and the taper rate for universal credit as an important first step in addressing this rising tide of in-work poverty?

Amber Rudd: There are many different levers that we can assist with to ensure that we reduce poverty overall and child poverty in particular. I have been focusing particularly on ensuring that more childcare is available and accessible to parents who want to get back into work, sometimes full time, so that the whole family income can be increased. That is a really positive way to try to assist people such as the hon. Lady’s constituents.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Some people working in Truro and Falmouth tell me that the faster technology changes, the more frightened they feel of being left behind. I therefore very much welcome the Secretary of State’s recent announcement enabling work coaches to support people in work to upskill and transition to better-paid employment, including in the new tech sectors. When will my constituents be able to benefit from this new service?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that some people are very concerned about this; they see the changing face of the workplace, and they are concerned about their own job security and skills. I am determined to ensure that we give people the skills they need and that we work with work coaches on projects to ensure that people get the right support. I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend, particularly as she did such fantastic work in my Department, to ensure that her constituents are early beneficiaries.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know that, from April, 15% of claimants are not receiving their first payment within five weeks. Will the Secretary of State tell us what action the Department is taking to ensure that claimants are paid in a timeous fashion?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are seeing constant improvements in the rate at which pay is received by claimants as early as possible. We have ensured that advance payments are available, and I am vigilant about ensuring that the figure of 85% for those receiving the actual application on time is constantly improving.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what safeguards are in place to help universal credit claimants with regard to the repayments of any debts they might have accrued?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. Many universal credit applicants have already accrued debts, and sometimes they wish to take out an advance on their claim, which they would then need to repay over a period. We have been able to reduce the amount that they need to repay, from 40% to 30%, to ensure that they can keep more of their funds. I am constantly alert to the fact that people may have debts, and we need to be careful about the rate at which they need to repay, to protect vulnerable clients.

People with Disabilities: Employment

3. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work. [910834]

8. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work. [910840]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): We support disabled people to enter employment through initiatives such as the Work and Health programme, which is expected to support 220,000 disabled people over five years, the personal support package, and the new intensive personal employment support programme. Access to Work approved support for nearly 34,000 disabled workers last year, and we engage with employers through Disability Confident.

Huw Merriman: Employment prospects for young people with hidden disabilities or who are on an education, health and care plan are much lower than the mainstream average. Supported internships offer a way through, but the take-up from employers is painfully low. Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for overall targets, may I ask the Minister to work across
the Government to ensure that we can use the apprenticeship levy to fund employers to enable them to take up more of these excellent opportunities?

**Justin Tomlinson**: My hon. Friend has been a real champion in pushing forward the opportunities created through supported internships and traineeships, and through our efforts to open up apprenticeships to those with learning disabilities. I will continue to work with the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to increase awareness among employers, and I very much welcome the fact that last year Access to Work saw a 28% increase in take-up for those aged between 16 and 24, in part because of the expansion of the supported internships.

**Alex Chalk**: Specsavers in Cheltenham has teamed up with the GEM project to recruit people with disabilities into the world of work, and the impact has been transformational, resulting in improvements in staff morale and in productivity. What more can the Government do to ensure that the message gets out that recruiting people with disabilities is good for the individuals themselves and good for society?

**Justin Tomlinson**: My hon. Friend has worked really hard to promote opportunities for employers in his constituency to employ people with disabilities. I welcome the fact that, over the past five years, this Government have seen an extra 930,000 more disabled people in work and that, for the first time ever, there are now more disabled people in work than not in work. The key is to give businesses the confidence to realise that they can benefit, and that this is a win-win for the disabled person and for the business.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My concern relates to the number of people who are dying after being found fit for work. Further to my letter to the Secretary of State, will she commit to publish the Department’s internal reviews of the cases of those who have died? Will she also commit to an independent inquiry? Will she ensure that if any evidence of wrongdoing by someone in public office is found, that information will be forwarded to the police?

**Justin Tomlinson**: This Government are committed to working with stakeholders and those with frontline experience to continue to make improvements. There have been two independent reviews of the work capability assessment, and we have accepted and implemented over 100 improvements. We will continue to do all that we can to improve the process for claimants.

**Justin Tomlinson**: All claimants should be advised at the beginning of the process that there are alternative methods of communication. I welcome the introduction of the Citizens Advice provision across the jobcentre network, which is an additional layer of independent support, particularly for vulnerable claimants who may find it difficult to access services.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): May I welcome the Minister to his post? As the National Audit Office recently pointed out, the number of disabled people out of work has stagnated at 3.7 million during the past five years, because increases in the number of disabled people employed have not been matched by a decrease in the number of disabled people who are out of work. Under the Government’s flagship Disability Confident scheme, it is possible to be a Disability Confident employer without actually employing a single disabled person. Will the Minister now commit to independent evaluation of the effectiveness of that flagship scheme?

**Justin Tomlinson**: The Government have actually delivered an additional 930,000 job opportunities for disabled people over the past five years, and for the first time more disabled people are in work than out of work. The NAO also welcomed our joint work with the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly in the area of mental health. As for the Disability Confident scheme, I welcome the fact that 49% of the businesses that have signed up have said that it helped them to recruit at least one additional member of staff with either a disability or a long-term health condition.

**Young Vulnerable Adults: Universal Credit**

4. **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support young vulnerable adults in receipt of universal credit who live in supported accommodation.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions** (Will Quince): As announced in August last year, housing costs for all claimants in supported housing, including universal credit claimants, will continue to be met through housing benefit. Maintaining housing benefit for all supported housing reflects the particular needs of these vulnerable groups.

**Paul Masterton**: I welcome the Minister to his new role. However, is he aware of an issue with the Universal Credit Regulations 2013, which refer only to English county councils as relevant bodies? Supported accommodation provided by Scottish local authorities is not covered, even though those living in identical circumstances in accommodation in England will be covered and so will still be subject to housing benefit. Will he meet me to discuss the matter?

**Will Quince**: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a passionate campaigner, and I recognise that that is a specific constituency issue. There is no difference in how English lower-tier local authorities and Scottish local authorities are treated within the regulations. Amendments to the regulations were introduced in 2014 to extend the protection to other supported housing, which was not previously included and was most likely to be affected by the welfare reforms. However, I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this complex issue further.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Contrary to what the Minister just said, I have had a small group of constituency cases in which the Department for
Work and Pensions does not seem able to decide whether people in supported accommodation should continue on housing benefit or whether their housing costs should be paid through universal credit. Will he repeat his clarification to make the situation absolutely certain, because the DWP does not seem able to decide in its own cases?

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am happy to look at those individual cases. He can write to me, or I would be happy to meet him.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, I could probably ask this question on the back of any question on the Order Paper. Broadband connectivity is very poor in parts of my constituency, which surely flies in the face of the Government’s best efforts to ensure that people who deserve benefits get them and that people who want to get back to work have that opportunity. What do the Government intend to do about the problem to help my constituents?

**Will Quince:** The question is a good one, and we will always look at alternative forms of communication.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Too many young people who are sofa-surfing or, worse, sleeping rough are doing so because of problems due to universal credit delays and sanctions. When will the Government do an assessment of the impact of these delays and sanctions on vulnerable young people?

**Will Quince:** That is why, in recent Budgets, we have put an additional £1.7 billion into the universal credit system.

**Care Leavers: Employment**

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps is the Government taking to increase job opportunities for care leavers?

6. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system.

7. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system.

8. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Why is the youth obligation failing our young people so badly? More people on the youth obligation are falling out of benefits altogether. They are unable to maintain stability and are unable to go on to seek work.

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I gently point out that youth unemployment has halved under this Government.

**Vulnerable Claimants: UC and the Legacy System**

6. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system.

9. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants compared with the legacy system.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd):** Universal credit makes sure that payments reach those who need them most. Around 1 million disabled households will receive, on average, £100 more per month on universal credit than on the system it replaces. As a single system that integrates six legacy benefits, universal credit will enable 700,000 households to access approximately £2.4 billion of welfare that was previously unclaimed.

**Giles Watling:** I recently wrote to the Secretary of State about one of my constituents in Clacton and the severe disability premium. I set out in the letter how my constituent was moved on to universal credit in October but now says that she is £185 a month worse off. I know the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration Pilot and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019 will rectify her situation and provide a lump sum to cover the missed payments since she moved. This is welcome, but when does the Secretary of State expect the regulations to be voted on so they can become law, especially given the real need of some claimants now?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter on behalf of his constituent. As he will be aware, there has recently been a court judgment on the Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) (SDP Gateway) Amendment Regulations 2019, and we will have to wait to consider it before I will be able to give him an update. I will come back to him on the earliest possible occasion, because I understand the concern his constituent must have on this matter.

**Bob Blackman:** Without a roof over one’s head, it is very difficult to get a job or to claim benefits. Without a job, it is almost impossible to afford rent, so what is my right hon. Friend going to do to ensure that universal credit claimants are helped and assisted not only to get a roof over their heads but to get back into work?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend asks a question about which he has done so much, and I start by paying tribute to his incredible work to help homeless people in the previous Parliament. We recognise the concerns about homelessness, and I am determined to make sure we help homeless people to rebuild their lives. I recognise the link he so eloquently describes between jobs and homes. As part of the rough sleeping strategy, we will establish a single point of contact for homelessness at every jobcentre. I recently announced that we are increasing awareness of direct

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**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Of what does the Minister’s work with Barnardo’s consist?

**Will Quince:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. He is a passionate campaigner and supporter of Barnardo’s. The Department and Barnardo’s are developing a small work experience pilot for care leavers in a number of Barnardo’s high street shops. More broadly, the Government aim to use the care leaver covenant to secure 1,000 employment opportunities by September 2021.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** What does the Minister’s work with Barnardo’s consist?

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**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Why is the youth obligation failing our young people so badly? More people on the youth obligation are falling out of benefits altogether. They are unable to maintain stability and are unable to go on to seek work.

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I gently point out that youth unemployment has halved under this Government.
payments to private landlords under universal credit to protect vulnerable claimants’ rent. Many private landlords have told us that that will help to ensure that vulnerable people are able to stay in their homes.

21. [910854] Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Since the roll-out of universal credit in Redcar and Cleveland last November, I have seen an increasing flow of people coming to my office in crisis and desperation, such as the new mother who was receiving income support with tax credits but who, on transition to universal credit, has lost nearly £400 a month, including milk tokens. Universal credit is not working and it is hitting the poorest people hardest. When will the right hon. Lady do the right thing and fix this mess before more people are pushed into poverty?

Amber Rudd: I would ask the hon. Lady to work with us on UC and with her local jobcentre. The National Audit Office recently commented that the right thing is to continue with UC. I understand that it is often difficult for individuals who are concerned about moving from the six legacy benefits to one benefit, but my experience from talking to people is that even though they were concerned, once they are on UC they almost exclusively say that it is a better system than the previous one.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Shelter Cymru, a Welsh housing association, has growing concerns that tenants threatened with eviction, who are dependent on UC payments are not able to meet the deadlines to settle arrears claims. Will the Minister consider allowing fast-track payments, especially for those facing eviction?

Amber Rudd: I would hope that the possibility of evictions will be reduced by our new plans to allow many more people to have their rent paid directly to housing associations and, increasingly, to private landlords. The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, and she needs to give me an opportunity to look at it; perhaps she would like to come to my surgery in the House of Commons next week or write to me about it.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Under UC, claimants will be treated as terminally ill only if they are not expected to live for any longer than six months. Owing to medical advances and the nature of some diseases, some people may live much longer than that, so what steps is the Department taking to ensure that those who are terminally ill but with a life expectancy of more than six months will be able to receive support through UC?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising such an important issue. It is so important that when people receive such a devastating diagnosis they are treated with care. So where a claimant has been diagnosed with a terminal illness but has a life expectancy of longer than six months, and they have satisfied the conditions of being treated as having either limited capability for work and work-related activity or limited capability for work, they will be submitted for an immediate work capability assessment referral. I hope that that answer satisfies the hon. Gentleman. Friend.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): One of the clear vulnerabilities for people accessing UC is indebtedness; the Department’s figures show that 60% of all new UC applicants receive an advance payment. We know that people are in desperate need at that application stage, so will the Government consider making the advance payment assessment the first assessment and any advance payment the first payment of that person’s UC claim?

Amber Rudd: I understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from and his desire to ensure that these people, who are often on very low incomes and in difficult circumstances, are looked after when they first make their application. We believe we have made the right changes to be able to address that, not only with the advance payment, but with the housing benefit run-on that comes after two weeks, which should give them additional funds in order to be able to support themselves. Of course we will also be introducing further run-ons of other benefits from next year. We are improving the ability of people to access money all the time.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Government’s plans for payments to severe disability premium recipients who lost about £180 a month when they were forced to transfer to UC were found to be discriminatory by the High Court on 3 May. Severely ill and disabled people should not have to fight through the courts for the support they should be entitled to, so will the Government now ensure that people receive payments, as soon as possible, that fully reflect the loss they have suffered?

Amber Rudd: As the hon. Lady will be aware, my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work took an urgent question on this last week and fully answered the questions that many people in the House had. The issue is the access that we put in place through a gateway and whether it is the right amount—the amount that was paid previously or the amount that is paid subsequently. We have decided that we will consider this before replying in full to the Court.

Margaret Greenwood: New research from the Children’s Commissioner found that the introduction of UC, the two-child limit and the benefit cap combined will mean that the number of children in families struggling to make ends meet will almost double in some areas. The Trussell Trust distributed nearly 600,000 emergency food parcels to children last year. When will the Government wake up and once again make tackling child poverty the priority it should be?

Amber Rudd: Tackling child poverty and poverty in general is absolutely a priority of this Government, which is why we are so focused on ensuring that UC supports people into work as well as providing the necessary safety net. Last week, I made a speech about ensuring that there is additional support for people when they are on low income and finding new ways of getting better access to different skilled work.

Pensioners on Fixed Incomes

7. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): How many pensioners on fixed incomes have had their benefits reduced in the last nine years.

[910839]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners, including the state pension, which is now worth £1,600 more than in 2010. Means-tested benefits are adjusted according to changes in circumstances, and it is not possible to say how many pensioners have had an increase or reduction, but it is the case that this Government spend more on pensioners than any Government have ever done before.

Stephen McPartland: More than 750,000 pensioners are in receipt of disability living allowance, and those who turned 65 after April 2013 are being kicked off DLA and are forced to apply for personal independence payment. Many of them are not applying, and of those who do, some are not receiving PIP. Why are we not transferring these pensioners across automatically?

Guy Opperman: It is right to say that 75% of all reassessed claimants receive a PIP award, and nearly 67,000 more people aged 65 or over are on either DLA or PIP than when PIP was first introduced in 2013. I take my hon. Friend’s point, though, and the Minister for Disabled People will be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I am sure he would make the point that the Government spend more than £20 billion on DLA and PIP, which is up from £15 billion in 2012.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The inquest for my constituent Joy Worrall took place last Thursday. Joy was 82 years old. It was confirmed that she had committed suicide after the DWP wrongly stopped her benefits and her winter fuel allowance for a period of 15 months before her death. At the time of her death, Joy had £5 in her account. Will the Minister and his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State undertake, for the family, who have asked me to do this for them, an urgent inquiry into why Joy was not paid her pension or her winter fuel allowance for that period? Will he ensure that nobody will ever again commit suicide because of poverty?

Guy Opperman: The right hon. Gentleman rightly raises his constituent’s case. I have already spoken to him on two occasions. Our thoughts are with Mrs Worrall’s family and friends. The Government apologise unreservedly for the clerical error—it was a clerical error—that led to Mrs Worrall’s pensions payment being stopped. We have urgently reviewed our processes and acted so that benefits are no longer linked on our systems, to try to ensure that this does not happen again. There is an internal process review; I undertake to write to the right hon. Gentleman in the short term with what we know and with more detail when the urgent process review has taken place. I am including Mr Worrall in that process.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): It would be helpful if every member of DWP staff were able to get to a Minister if something absurd was happening, rather than getting stuck in bureaucracy.

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend raises several points, but unquestionably the situation in relation to overseas pensions has been consistently enforced by every Government of every persuasion since the second world war, and there is no anticipation of changing that.

Of course, we will ensure that individual members of DWP staff up and down the country are able to go to their line managers and then to Members of Parliament or individual members of the Government on an ongoing basis.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Pensioner poverty halved under the most recent Labour Government; it has increased by 400,000 under this Government, with one in six pensioners living in poverty. Having broken one manifesto pledge on TV licences, Ministers are now breaking a second one, as mixed-aged couples are no longer being paid pension credit if one of them is under retirement age. How can the Government begin to justify the breaking of a solemn promise, particularly in circumstances where it will cost the couple concerned a staggering £7,320 a year?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the overall trend in the percentage of pensioners in poverty is a dramatic fall over several decades. The rates of material deprivation for pensioners are at a record low at this stage.

On the hon. Gentleman’s second point, couples who currently receive pension credit or housing benefit will not be affected by the change, as long as they remain entitled to either benefit. Claimants who would be eligible for pension credit or housing benefit for pensioners under the current rules but have not claimed before 15 May have until 13 August to make a backdated claim.

Jack Dromey: From Carillion to BHS, workers’ pensions are being put at risk by bad bosses, sloppy practices and poor enforcement. We have campaigned against that injustice. The defined benefit White Paper has proposed stronger powers and penalties. Ministers have promised to introduce such legislation, which we would support. Will the Government keep at least this promise so that we can send out a joint message that says, “Never again a Philip Green”?

Guy Opperman: We are agreed across the House that there must be action on defined benefits so that we stop what took place with Philip Green, and to address that the Secretary of State has brought forward proposals in the defined benefit White Paper. We propose to bring forward a Bill, when parliamentary time allows, to address the DB White Paper, collective defined contributions, Dashboard and a number of other matters, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on a cross-party basis to make that happen.

Universal Credit

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps she has taken to tailor universal credit to claimants’ needs.

[910842]
The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Under universal credit, our work coaches provide vital one-to-one support to all claimants. Work coaches receive appropriate training to ensure that they can offer support to claimant groups with a variety of characteristics.

Tom Pursglove: As I understand it, the test and learn approach has been crucial to improving the system and getting it right for individual claimants. What key lessons have been learned and what steps have been taken to address them?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the test and learn approach has allowed us to adapt the delivery of universal credit to support claimants more fully. Examples include: abolishing the seven-day waiting period; the introduction of 100% advances; the landlord portal; and the flexible support fund being used to cover initial childcare costs.

19. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is no coincidence that, as universal credit has hit Ealing in the past year, food bank use has doubled. Ealing Churches winter night shelter and Ealing soup kitchen report unprecedented demand, and six deaths have been reported among users of the soup kitchen in the past year. Are the Government not ashamed that Christian charities are having to mop up thanks to the gaps in their policy, and when will they put in place the National Audit Office’s recommendation to look into hardship as well as spouting statistics at us?

Alok Sharma: Of course there is a range of reasons why people make use of food banks, but what is important is that the DWP makes sure that we get funds to claimants in a timely manner. The Secretary of State has already talked about the 100% advances and the two-week housing benefit run-on, and, of course, there will be additional run-ons coming on in 2020.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I have constituents in Stirling who would like to take up work or to extend their hours of work but cannot afford to pay the upfront costs of childcare. Can the Minister tell the House what is being done to help parents with upfront costs of childcare?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Under universal credit, up to 85% of childcare costs can be covered and, as the Secretary of State announced earlier this year, we are making the flexible support fund available so that funding can be provided up front to take care of childcare costs, which will help people get into work.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is welcome that the Secretary of State has finally responded to pressure and abolished three-year sanctions, but failure to scrap this punishing regime entirely means, as we have heard across the House today, that many people including children will still suffer. Six months is a long time to go without money, so will she go the extra mile and abolish punitive sanctions altogether?

Alok Sharma: I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman has, in turn, welcomed what the Secretary of State has announced—it has absolutely been the right thing to do. Sanctions are not put forward indiscriminately; a very clear procedure takes place, and right now less than 3% of those who are on universal credit and under conditionality are getting a sanction. The average sanction rate is 31 days.

People with Disabilities: Employment

11. Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support people with disabilities in employment.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): We support disabled people in employment through initiatives such as Access to Work, which last year approved support for nearly 34,000 disabled people; Disability Confident, to which almost 12,000 employers are now signed up; and the £55 billion we will spend on benefits this year to support disabled people, including those who are in employment.

Dr Allin-Khan: Sarah Jeffers in Tooting requires a specialist wheelchair owing to her cerebral palsy. The Department for Work and Pensions has told her that she is required to pay £17,000 to fund the replacement of her broken wheelchair. Sarah’s job each day is to get disabled people back into work. However, without her wheelchair, she herself cannot work. The DWP has also stated that it cannot provide further funds for her wheelchair because she already receives support for her car from the Motability scheme. Will the Minister meet Sarah and me to discuss this complicated case?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady has been working brilliantly to support her constituent, whom we all want to remain in employment. From the details given to me already, it sounds as if Access to Work would have the potential to help with the funding towards her constituent’s wheelchair. I am happy to look into the details of the case as quickly as possible.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will he meet us?

Justin Tomlinson: And I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and her constituent.

Dr Allin-Khan: Thank you!

Women in Employment

13. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many women have entered employment in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England since 2010.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): The UK female employment rate has never been higher. The latest figures show that there are over 12 million women in employment in England, which is almost 1.4 million more than in 2010. My hon. Friend asks about his constituency. I can give him the figures for the east midlands, where there are 109,000 more women in work since 2010. The number of women claiming unemployment-related benefits in Northamptonshire has dropped by 28% in the last five years.
Mr Hollobone: Against the background of record levels of employment in the Kettering constituency, will the Secretary of State confirm that, whether someone is male or female, young or old, able or disabled, employment prospects in Kettering have never been brighter?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that employment prospects have never been brighter in Kettering, particularly with the strong advocacy of such an excellent Member of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can luxuriate in the lather of the praise conferred on him by the Secretary of State. Make sure it is bottled and keep it for a long time, man.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The question of women's employment is very important to me. Is the Secretary of State's Department doing long-term planning? Has she seen the recent research from Sheffield University and King's College London that says that the very areas that voted leave will be the hardest hit post-Brexit, with a 17% to 20% decrease in GDP? Is her Department getting ready for this terrible situation?

Amber Rudd: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are ensuring that we are prepared for any situation, whether that is leaving the European Union or changes to the workplace in general. We are working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that we are prepared for changes to employment structures, and I have been making some comments on that issue recently to ensure that the necessary training is provided in the workplace in the private sector as well as the assistance that we can give.

Poverty

14. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of poverty in the UK.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Government remain committed to tackling poverty so that we can make a lasting difference to long-term outcomes. This Government have lifted 400,000 people out of absolute poverty since 2010, and income inequality has fallen.

Patrick Grady: Very few people in Glasgow North moving on to universal credit feel as if they are moving out of hardship and poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said, 60% of claimants across the country automatically apply for the advance payment, which means that they automatically start receiving less universal credit as the repayments kick in, regardless of their means. How on earth is that helping to tackle hardship or people's ability to manage their money? Will the Department urgently review the advance payment system?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of ensuring that claimants do not go without any money, which is why we welcomed the improvements to make advance payments more accessible. Let us remember that, under the complicated six legacy benefits, more than £2.4 billion of benefits were left unclaimed every year, worth an average of £280 per month; that meant that 700,000 of some of the most vulnerable people were missing out on their entitlement.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): A constituent of mine who is a single mother with three children was persuaded to apply for a loan to replace her cooker. The loan company took her details and made an application for universal credit on her behalf, unbeknown to her, and claimed a large advance payment that they told her was the loan. When she reported this to the police and to the DWP and asked them to look into her case, they insisted that it was a valid claim for universal credit. She has had her advance payment, and she is left—pregnant, with three young children—with no access to any money until the end of the month. Please will the Minister or the Secretary of State look into this and make sure that vulnerable people cannot be treated in this way?

Justin Tomlinson: The circumstances just described sound horrendous. We will absolutely look into that as a matter of urgency and report back as quickly as possible.

Unemployment Trends

15. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of unemployment in the UK since 2010.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The unemployment rate is at its lowest since the 1970s. We have record employment with more people in work than ever before, and wages have been rising faster than inflation for 13 months in a row.

David T. C. Davies: The latest figures do indeed show that Britain's economy is booming, unlike those of the rest of the European Union. Do the Minister and his colleagues on the ministerial team agree that the prospect of Brexit, with or without a deal, is driving forward the British economy and confidence in it?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is of course right to point out that, despite any uncertainty around Brexit, the British economy is in good shape. We do have one of the highest employment rates in the EU, Britain is the No. 1 destination in Europe for foreign direct investment, and the IMF projects that our economy will grow faster than Germany's this year. Unlike the Opposition, Conservative Members believe in supporting businesses and employers.

Ex-offenders: Employment

16. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support ex-offenders into employment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The Government know that getting ex-offenders into work is a crucial part of rehabilitation. DWP prison work coaches and jobcentre work coaches provide tailored support to ex-offenders. The DWP works collaboratively with Ministry of Justice
on its education and employment strategy, creating a system where prisoners are on a path to employment as soon as they enter prison.

Mark Menzies: People from all walks of life have to undergo work capability assessments, but ex-offenders have complex needs and often institutionalised experiences. What measures is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the assessors themselves are taking the appropriate measures?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Healthcare professionals are subject to a rigorous recruitment process, followed by a comprehensive training programme in disability assessment for physical and mental health conditions, and have to be approved by the Department. They are then required to complete a programme of continuing professional development.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Reoffending rates among those who have served a sentence of less than 12 months are a staggering 64%. The Ministry of Justice has signalled a clear intent to move away from this model of sentencing. What discussions have Ministers had with the Ministry of Justice about ensuring that community-based sentences have substantive support around employment to ensure that reoffending is curbed and sentences deliver meaningful rehabilitation and workplace opportunities?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Being relatively new in post, I have not had those conversations as yet, but I do work very closely with my counterpart at the Ministry of Justice and will be having such conversations.

Mr Speaker: We look forward to an update in due course and we are grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Working People’s Income: Universal Credit

18. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps has her Department taken to increase working people’s income through universal credit in this financial year?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): That is such a relevant question from my hon. Friend. The key difference between the legacy system and the universal credit system is that work coaches provide such a tailored, individual service, which will give his constituents the additional support they need to make sure they get the best financial reward from their work this year.

Steve Double: Cornwall has a higher than average number of self-employed people—about 60% higher than the English average. Being self-employed and claiming universal credit can present a number of challenges, particularly in the early years when starting out. What specific help are we giving to self-employed people who need to claim universal credit?

Amber Rudd: It is good to hear from my hon. Friend quite how enterprising his county is. I reassure him that work coaches provide additional support to allow those who want to become self-employed to do so via the new enterprise allowance, which provides mentoring support and additional financial support. We announced in the last Budget a one-year grace period from the minimum income floor for claimants joining universal credit with an existing business. All these efforts try to make sure that his constituents, and other people throughout the country, are able to set up their businesses and work self-employed and get access to universal credit.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State has seen the comments made by the Children’s Commissioner based on research carried out by Policy in Practice. The Commissioners said that the number of children in families running a monthly deficit is expected to double in some areas as a result of the introduction of universal credit. Does she accept that this is completely disgraceful, and what is she going to do about it?

Amber Rudd: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we care enormously about ensuring that there are fewer children in poverty than before. There are fewer children in poverty and fewer families in poverty since 2010. As we know, the best way to help people out of poverty is to ensure that families have work. I am ambitious to ensure that people in low-paid work can get into higher-paid work, which is why I made the announcements last week, ensuring that work coaches can give additional support.

Topical Questions

T2. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Employment is at a record high, with 32.72 million people in work. Overall, 3.6 million more people have entered work since 2010, which is on average 1,000 people each and every day, and the vast majority of them are in full-time, high-skilled jobs. I know that there are concerns about low-paid work, which I am determined to address. That is why I made announcements last week about new projects working with our excellent work coaches on job switching and with employers in the private sector, to see how we can help individuals across the country to access the better-paid jobs that will help them and their families.

Chris Bryant: If you were to look in the faces of the vast majority of people who have an acquired brain injury, you would not be able to spot anything wrong whatsoever, but inside is somebody who has a massive sense of fatigue. They might have major memory problems or have completely lost their executive function, unable to make proper decisions for themselves, but when the assessor from the DWP comes they will want to please them and will exaggerate the improvement in their condition. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that every single person who, on behalf of the DWP, goes to see somebody with a brain injury fully understands how brain injury can fluctuate?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that, and I know how much he has done to support people with brain conditions. We are ensuring that we do that through the welfare system, so that those with
acquired brain injury and associated neurological complications receive the right support, but I recognise the issue he raises. We are doing more to ensure that our health assessors have all the necessary training, so that they are able to recognise different challenges, such as acquired brain injury.

T3. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that, since 2010, 650,000 fewer children are growing up in workless households, giving them the benefit of a higher family income and providing them with a role model in the world of work?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that. We are ambitious to ensure that we continue to take children and families out of poverty, and we acknowledge that there is more to be done. I believe that the best way to do that is to focus on growing a strong economy, with better-paid jobs, and ensuring that those on lower incomes can access those jobs.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Last week, the Secretary of State kept her name in the Tory leadership fray by admitting that social security sanctions can “undermine” the aim to help people into work and reducing the longest sanctions from three years to six months, which we welcome, but will her review of sanctions include the possibility of scrapping them altogether? If not, can she really make a name for herself by explaining how anyone is expected to live on fresh air for six months?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his cautious welcome of the announcement I made last week about ensuring that there will be no sanctions of more than six months, but, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has pointed out, sanctions are usually no more than 30 days. I have had many conversations with work coaches, who have personal relationships with individuals, and they reassure me that they use sanctions only as a last resort. The work coaches who provide this tailored support also tell me—I would be interested if the hon. Gentleman had a different experience—that sanctions are an important part of the tools they have.

T6. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has fought a very good campaign to have a children’s funeral fund set up in England. She was told that it would happen within 12 months, and it has not. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all of us on the Government Benches have an obligation to fulfil promises that have been made, and that that is a very important one?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the hon. Gentleman. I welcome his question, and I absolutely agree with him. He may know that I campaigned with the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) before taking up my post. I am personally committed to this, the Department is committed to this, the Prime Minister is committed to this and we will deliver it.

T5. Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Access to Work is essential to enabling disabled people to get into employment, but does the Minister recognise that delays with processing applications are causing real difficulty, but particularly for people who are self-employed or, indeed, holding elected office in local government. May I ask him to meet me and one of my local councillors, Rosa Gomez, to discuss these particular challenges?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I thank the hon. Gentleman. I welcome the fact that record numbers benefited from Access to Work last year—an increase of 13%—but operational improvements still need to be delivered. I would welcome an opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman to look at some areas of priority for us.

T9. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Minister’s Department close the loophole that allows terminally ill employees to be dismissed by their employers once one reasonable adjustment has been made, which does not allow for any more changes to the employee’s health because it is not covered by the disability legislation?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a real champion in this really important area of work. The Government are fully committed to protecting people with disabilities in the workplace and elsewhere. We welcome the fact that over 1 million employees are now protected by the voluntary employers charter, and this is a real step forward. There is more work to be done, and I welcome the fact that MPs are working together cross-party on this vital issue.

T8. Tonya Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Anne Puckridge, a brave 94-year-old world war two veteran who served in three armed forces, moved to Canada in 2001 and now receives £72.50 a week, instead of £125.95 a week, of the state pension she is owed. She is not alone: 510,000 British pensioners are in the same situation due to the policy that awards an increase only to some overseas pensioners. The pensions Minister has responded on this topic, but will he agree to meet me to discuss Anne’s case and those of the many others struggling as victims of frozen pensions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The hon. Lady knows that the policy pursued by this Government is the same policy that was pursued during the 13 years of the Labour Government and all other Governments since the second world war. It is a consistent approach that is absolutely endorsed by the present Government, and I am afraid there are no plans to change the policy at present.

T10. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): As has been mentioned, the proportion of self-employed people in South East Cornwall is higher than the national average, showing that my constituents have an entrepreneurial spirit. What is my right hon. Friend’s Department doing to support self-employed people in Cornwall and across the country to make their businesses an increasing success?

Amber Rudd: It is indeed interesting to hear of this success: the rate of self-employed people in Cornwall is 5.5 percentage points greater than the UK average. In Cornwall, jobcentres are working in partnership with the local authority and with Big Lottery funding to provide self-employment workshops. In addition, across...
the UK work coaches are trained to provide additional support to self-employed people. This includes the new enterprise allowance, with which mentors can support claimants to develop their business further.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Every week in my surgery I hear from people who have been wrongly assessed as being fit for work when they are so clearly disabled. I welcome the Secretary of State’s offer to sit down with us individually in the Tea Room, but I fear for all those constituents who do not think of going to their MP and the countless numbers of people out there who do not know how to access help. Surely it is now time for the Secretary of State to admit that the whole process of work capability assessments is flawed and in need of an urgent review.

Amber Rudd: I am aware of this, and a number of Members of Parliament have raised issues with me. As a Member of Parliament myself, I know that we need to do better at making sure that people do not have to wait so long for a tribunal, so I am looking again at what we can do. I am focusing particularly on making sure that the first decision collects more information, and that the mandatory reassessment has more content put into it. We are already looking into this, and I am seeing some extraordinarily good progress being made in making sure that the mandatory reconsideration has more information.

I will come back to the hon. Lady and others with more information in due course. I recognise that we need to do more, and I am on it.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What progress is being made to support more people in East Renfrewshire into an occupational pension scheme through auto-enrolment?

Guy Opperman: It was a great pleasure to visit Barrhead with my hon. Friend and meet his outstanding constituents. As a Member of Parliament myself, I know that we need to do better at making sure that people do not have to wait so long for a tribunal, so I am looking again at what we can do. I am focusing particularly on making sure that the first decision collects more information, and that the mandatory reassessment has more content put into it. We are already looking into this, and I am seeing some extraordinarily good progress being made in making sure that the mandatory reconsideration has more information.

I will come back to the hon. Lady. Lady and others with more information in due course. I recognise that we need to do more, and I am on it.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): For clarity, can the Minister confirm that the Scottish Government have power under section 24 of the Scotland Act to top up reserve benefits, including for anyone affected by future changes to mixed-age couples’ benefits?

Guy Opperman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to clarify that sections 24 and 26 of the Scotland Act enable the Scottish Government to make top-up or discretionary payments to any person in Scotland who is in receipt of any reserved UK Government benefit. Put simply, the ball is in the Scottish Government’s court.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A constituent of mine is being passed from pillar to post by the DWP and the Scottish student loans group, both of which say she is entitled to support. She wants to start studying full time in September but, as a single parent, cannot do so without appropriate financial support. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet me to see whether we can find a way out of this Catch-22 situation and ensure that my constituent and other single mothers like her, who want to improve their families’ opportunities, have the support to do so?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Yes, I will of course meet the hon. Lady.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1.9 million pensioners now live in poverty, which is a complete disgrace. Given that 46,000 pensioners died prematurely last year, why has the winter fuel allowance not been increased for more than a decade?

Guy Opperman: It is not specifically the case that pensioners are in poverty compared with previous records, which show that pensioner poverty is coming down. I will write to the hon. Lady in respect of her specific point about the winter fuel allowance.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I listened carefully to the Minister’s earlier answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). It was simply not good enough because in just two days’ time changes by this Government to mixed-age couples’ benefits will make them ineligible for pension credit and force them both to apply for universal credit, which will result in many losing thousands of pounds. With one in six older people already living in poverty, is it not time that the Minister rethought the changes, or is he determined to increase those shameful levels of poverty?

Guy Opperman: Pension credit is intended to provide long-term support to economically inactive pensioner households. It is not intended to support working-age claimants. This change ensures that people cannot access pensioner benefits before they have reached state pension age, so taxpayer support is directed to where it is needed most.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Earlier this year I met representatives of those who carry out work capability assessments and representatives from the previous disability Minister’s office. I was assured
that those carrying out capability assessments were well aware of unseen conditions such as ME, but since then I have been overwhelmed with correspondence saying that people with ME are being declared fit for work. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that the assessors are aware of conditions such as ME?

Justin Tomlinson: There is a real emphasis on ensuring that assessors are best placed to identify how fluctuating health conditions and hidden disabilities will impact on the assessment. I am disappointed to hear what the hon. Lady reports and I would be happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My caseworkers recently updated me on the thousands and thousands of pounds of public money that they have helped to recover for constituents who are entitled to it, often after many months of delays. I am not satisfied with that; I am angry that this Government Department is keeping so many of my constituents and, I presume, others across the country in poverty for so long when they are owed this money. What is the Government doing about reviewing DWP’s shameful record on paying people money to which they are entitled?

Alok Sharma: I would just point out to the hon. Lady that, under the legacy benefits system, there are £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits. That is changing and being fixed under universal credit. If she has specific cases, she will know that this ministerial team is always happy to talk to Members of Parliament to try to resolve issues. If she wants to talk about specific cases, I would be happy to do so after this session.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Visits to one of the food banks in my constituency have increased by 20% since the roll-out of universal credit. Trussell Trust referrals have risen by 52% since the roll-out of universal credit. Everything suggests that universal credit is not lifting people out of poverty, but pushing them further into it. Was that the Government’s intention with the roll-out of universal credit, because that is what is happening?

Amber Rudd: Universal credit is a vast improvement on the legacy benefits. There were six different benefits and three different places; the system was incredibly difficult to navigate, and there were vast numbers of complaints and problems with it. This new system is easier for people to navigate. Overall, it will be more generous, when it is fully rolled out, than the previous system. I wonder whether she has talked to any Members of Parliament who had the experience of having to navigate the six legacy benefits, of three different places to go to, and of annual tax credits. The complications were totally out of proportion compared with the challenges that people sometimes encounter now. Above all, there was the difficulty people had with the 16-hour threshold, where they could not take up new work if they were on a certain amount of benefits. We have reformed the system so that it works for people—it works for families, and it works for people trying to better themselves and get better access to work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Centrepoint’s evidence to the DWP Committee showed that 96% of the young people it surveyed were not offered a traineeship or work placement if they were still on the youth obligation for six months. Does the Minister think it is worth having a closer look at what more could be done to improve the youth obligation?

Alok Sharma: I share the hon. Lady’s desire to make sure the youth obligation support programme works properly. We are looking at extracting information from the system, and I hope shortly to come and report on the findings from that.
**Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission**

3.38 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** I would like to update the House on the progress we have made in tackling brain cancer, including on a new innovation that is now available across England.

For far too long, tackling brain cancer has been put in the “too difficult” box, and we are determined to change that. I want to pay tribute to the Petitions Committee, which did so much work on this; my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who picked up the subject in Government as Life Sciences Minister; my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, which brought parliamentarians together; my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), the current chair of the APPG; and, of course, Baroness Tessa Jowell, who campaigned passionately and tirelessly while battling the illness herself, and who, sadly, passed away a year ago.

Brain cancer is the most common cause of cancer-related deaths in children and young people under 19. Baroness Jowell called for all patients to benefit from 5-aminolevulinic acid, or “pink drink” as it is otherwise known: a dye that makes cancerous cells glow under ultraviolet light, thereby making it easier for surgeons to target the right areas. Trials have shown that, when the dye is used, surgeons can successfully remove a whole tumour in 70% of cases, compared to 30% of those without.

I am pleased to inform the House that we have now rolled out this ground-breaking treatment aid across England, with the potential to save the lives of 2,000 patients every year. That is part of the £33.9 billion extra that we are putting into the NHS and the NHS long-term plan. This procedure will now be expanded to every neurological centre in England. That is a fitting testament to Tessa Jowell’s memory.

It is worth pausing for a moment to remember the courageous words that Tessa Jowell used to urge us to rise above our differences. She said that this approach may be put into the ‘too difficult’ box, but I also have great hope.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1169.]

That represents the very best of our democracy and of our Parliament. On behalf of all those who have died of brain cancer, all those—children and adults alike—who have campaigned, and all those seeking to do research, of which there is more to come in future, we are acting.

I want to mention three further areas in detail. The first is research. In the past, not enough research was done into the causes of and treatments for brain cancer. In the last year, the Government have made an unprecedented £40 million available to fund cutting-edge research of new treatments and drugs through the National Institute for Health Research. That will build on our outstanding reputation for neuroscience and oncology research, and increase the quality, quantity and diversity of brain cancer research. That funding was further enhanced by Cancer Research UK committing an additional £25 million to support brain tumour research. The size of those pledges will cement the UK’s position as a leading global centre.

Secondly, on our NHS cancer workforce, the number of specialist cancer staff in the NHS is set to grow as we put the £33.9 billion into the NHS over the next five years. Health Education England’s cancer workforce plan, and our upcoming NHS people plan, will set out in detail the steps we are taking to recruit a world-class cancer workforce. We made available an additional £8.6 million in the cancer workforce last year, and we aim to have 300 more radiographers start training by 2021.

Finally, on empowering patients, we have worked closely with the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, Jess Mills and others to ensure patients are at the heart of all these efforts. The mission brings together Government, the NHS, researchers, pharmaceutical companies and patients to ensure that data is shared and disseminated properly so that more patients in the UK and around the world can benefit from what is learned. Due to the complexity of brain cancer, we must provide joined-up care that meets each patient’s unique needs. The NHS is focused on improving care for brain cancer patients to ensure they have access to dedicated out-patient clinics and consultations, wherever they live.

I hope the whole House will recognise the important progress made over the past year in rising to the challenge set by Baroness Jowell and the families of those who have lost loved ones to brain cancer. That progress has been possible only through the collective effort of patients, the NHS, charities and industry. That work is and will continue to be collaborative.

In her final speech in the other place last January, Tessa Jowell said:

“I am not afraid. I am fearful that this new and important approach may be put into the ‘too difficult’ box, but I also have great hope.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

That hope was an inspiration to us all. We will rise to the challenge that she left us. We must not waiver in that task. I commend this statement to the House.

3.39 pm

**Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op):** I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. We warmly welcome today’s announcement. His tribute to our much-missed friend and colleague was moving and powerful. It is an extraordinary testament to Tessa’s bravery that in the final harrowing months of her life, faced with a highly aggressive and very-difficult-to-treat cancer, and in full knowledge of the life expectancy associated with such a devastating cancer, Tessa led from the front to campaign for better brain cancer treatment for others. She spoke with extraordinary courage in the Lords, she brought the then Secretary of State and me together, and she convinced Ministers to shift policy, not by garnering sympathy, understandable though that approach would have been, but by persuasion based on facts and policy argument. It was typical Tessa.

Tessa would have been delighted by the Government’s announcement—some 2,000 brain cancer patients a year will now benefit from the “pink drink” solution—but she would be keen to go further still. Almost 11,000 people
are diagnosed each year with a primary brain tumour, including 500 children and young people, which is 30 people every day, and more than 5,000 people lose their lives to a brain tumour each year. Brain tumours reduce life expectancy by around 20 years, which is the highest of any cancer, and are the largest cause of preventable blindness in children.

We live in hope of dramatic improvements, but further research is needed, given that less than 2% of the £500 million spent on cancer research is dedicated to brain tumours. I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitments on research, but does he agree that we also desperately need more involvement in clinical trials? The number of brain cancer patients taking part in clinical trials is less than half the average across all cancers. How will the Government encourage more trials and data sharing?

Finally, we know that the NHS remains under considerable strain generally. The 93% target for a two-week wait from GP urgent referral to first consultant appointment was not met once last year. Neurosurgery is no exception. In March 2019, the 18-week completion target for referral to treatment pathways stood at 81.3% for neurosurgery—5% lower than the average for all specialties—which made neurosurgery the worst performing specialty. This is a question of both resourcing and staffing. I know the Secretary of State has his answer on revenue resourcing—we disagree, but we will leave our political arguments for another day—but on workforce there are vacancies for more than 400 specialist cancer nurses, chemotherapy nurses and palliative care nurses, and there are diagnostic workforce vacancies too.

Meanwhile, the staff who are there are reliant on outdated equipment, and we have among the lowest numbers of MRI and CT scanners in the world. Failing to diagnose early is worse for the patient and more costly for the NHS, so will the Secretary of State update us on when we can expect Dido Harding’s workforce plan? Can he reassure us that the cancer workforce will be a key part of that plan? On equipment and MRI scanners, can he guarantee that the NHS will see increased capital investment budgets in the spending review so that it can upgrade existing equipment and increase the number of MRI and CT scanners?

Overall, however, we welcome today’s announcement. It is a fitting tribute to our friend Tessa Jowell, and like Tessa herself will touch the lives of so many.

Matt Hancock: The cross-party tone of this discussion demonstrates what we can achieve when we work together. This is not just about Baroness Jowell, who did so much and was so brave in how she made her case—in the last few months in particular, but before that as well. It is about the many others who have worked together, including the many who were inspired by her words to work harder on brain cancer.

In truth, the amount of research money going into brain cancer—and therefore the number of clinical trials, which the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) mentioned—was too low. There were so few clinical trials because research overall was too low. That is partly because brain cancer is a very difficult disease to treat. Just because it is difficult, however, does not mean we should not try, so we have increased the amount of research money, and I am determined to see an increase in the number of clinical trials and to make sure that the data from them is properly used and openly disseminated.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the cancer workforce. As I mentioned, of course we will need more people to treat cancer. That is partly what the £33.9 billion extra is all about.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that we need more early diagnosis. The truth is that, while the NHS is very good at treating cancer once it has been spotted—indeed, it is one of the best in the world—our cancer survival rates in this country need to improve through early diagnosis. That means giving more support to community services, strengthening primary care and ensuring that we have the diagnostic tools that he mentioned. We have more MRI scanners and more Linux machines for treatment purposes, but of course there is always more that we can do.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): During my time as the cancer Minister, I had the pleasure of meeting Tessa. You will recall, Mr Speaker, a very special debate that we had in the Chamber last April, when Tessa was back in the House of Commons, sitting in the Under-Gallery with her lovely family and listening to the debate.

Obviously I welcome the roll-out of 5-aminolevulinic acid—5-ALA—which allows surgeons to tackle some of the most difficult cases while ensuring that the healthy cells remain untouched. Does the Secretary of State agree that the exciting new frontier in cancer treatment is not only allowing people to survive it—more people are doing that for longer than ever before—but enabling them to live really well after treatment? It is no good surviving cancer if it is a rubbish time afterwards. Is that not the real promise of this?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is a former colleague and dependable Minister, and I regret not having mentioned the work that he did in my opening remarks. The hon. Member for Leicester South said that he and my predecessor as Secretary of State had worked together on this issue, but the person who did the hard yards was my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to him.

My hon. Friend is completely right: it is not just about surviving cancer, but about living well both with and after it. We must make sure that we learn that lesson and put the needs of patients at the heart of the process—not only their medical needs, but their non-medical and social needs. One of the humorous and amusing things that Tessa would talk about was the importance of the shape of the wig and the colour of the headscarf to a person who is going through chemotherapy, and that should be at the heart of treatment.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the statement, and thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of it. I join Members on both sides of the House in remembering Dame Tessa Jowell, her lifetime of public service and, of course, her brave campaigning during the final months of her life.

This research funding is very welcome, and it was good to see Edinburgh University’s Dr Steven Pollard involved with the Tessa Jowell mission. Will the Secretary of State expand on what he said about research spending...
being UK-wide, and on the implications of that? Will he also say something about how his Department has worked with the Scottish Government in this important area?

I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the statement made this morning by Medac, which manufactures the “pink drink”, and its concerns about medical supplies post Brexit. Will he update the House on the work that he is doing to ensure the smooth continuing supply of that very important medicine?

Matt Hancock: It shows the power of bringing people together that we can agree with the Scottish National party’s Front Bencher on the importance of this agenda. I am delighted that the research spans the whole UK. The National Institute for Health Care Reform is reserved, and health research takes place throughout the country, and indeed internationally—throughout Europe and the world as a whole. Much of the best research is global, and that must continue. I shall be happy to work with colleagues in the SNP Government to further this mission and this end. Innovations of this kind are of course available to the NHS in Scotland, but the decision on whether to roll them out there will be a matter for Scottish Ministers, as that element is devolved.

As for the question of Brexit, I have absolutely no doubt that whatever form Brexit takes, we will do everything we can to ensure the continued and unhindered flow of medicines. We did an enormous amount of work to ensure that was the case ahead of 29 March. I have seen the comments the hon. Gentleman mentions from the company that supplies this drug. I see absolutely no reason to think that Brexit should have any impact at all on the ability to use this cutting-edge drug to save people’s lives.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): First, may I thank everyone in Taunton Deane who was involved in raising money for the new MRI scanner? It was a huge local team effort. May I also welcome today’s announcement and the use of this dye, which will potentially save 2,000 patient lives and which is to be rolled out into all those neurological centres? That is wonderful news and demonstrates that where there is a will in this place there usually is a way.

I also want to highlight the following. Does the Secretary of State agree that when we are talking about this issue, we should also remember cancers that spread from other parts of the body to the brain—it is called metastasis? This is a very complex area and it needs more input in just the way that we have looked at this issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that we ought to look at that in more detail? Unfortunately, I speak about this from experience, with a close family member being involved.

Matt Hancock: I know about my hon. Friend’s, sadly, personal experience with this horrible disease and pay tribute to her for speaking up because it is not easy. She is right to raise another frontier that we must cross, and I am fully open to research bids in this area to work not just on brain cancer but on brain cancer that is a secondary cancer, because that is a very important area to get right, too.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the announcement today and the progress made over the past year since Tessa so sadly passed away. I also welcome the announcement as someone who lost both my paternal grandparents to brain cancer. I want to pay tribute in particular to Tessa’s daughter, Jess Mills, who has worked with unswerving determination and energy to drive forward progress in Tessa’s name over the past year. May I say on behalf of my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood, who Tessa represented for 23 years, how proud we are of her powerful legacy on brain cancer and the difference her work will make for thousands of people for generations to come? Throughout the whole of Tessa’s 23 years in Parliament, she was a tireless champion of King’s College hospital, which is currently in a very challenged financial position. May I encourage the Secretary of State in continuing his commitment to £33.9 billion of additional funding to look at how this national support may also be marshalled to secure Tessa’s legacy at local level?

Matt Hancock: Baroness Jowell’s successor in her parliamentary seat speaks very powerfully and the hon. Lady is right to highlight the role of King’s in this research. King’s has been developing this treatment for years, and as a result of its work, it can now be rolled out nationally. It is a hospital that, as the hon. Lady says, needs to address some of its local challenges, but we should not take away from some of the globally cutting-edge work that it does and the positive impact it has; potentially 2,000 people alive each year who would otherwise die. That is testament to the importance of this research.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The first person I know who had a brain tumour and cancer and died was John Davies, who had been the MP for Knutsford shortly after I was first elected.

The NHS website is very good about the possible symptoms of brain tumours. May I strongly recommend that everyone who thinks they may have a worry consult their medical practitioners so that either they can be cleared or they can get early treatment, and is it not right that early diagnosis is the best way forward for those who may have the condition?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that: early diagnosis is critical to improving the proportion of people who survive cancers, because of course it is easier to treat people if diagnosis is early. We are reviewing all cancer screening programmes because they are not working well enough; the National Audit Office set that out in some detail recently, and we accept those findings. We want to get early diagnosis and screening right, and it is a top priority for the new Public Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), to make sure we do so that more people can survive.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): As the Secretary of State said, last weekend marked a year since the death of Tessa Jowell. We all heard the moving interview that Jess did at the weekend, which showed the commitment that she still has for taking on this issue and fighting for her mother’s legacy. On 19 April last year, we were in this place for a Back-Bench debate, with Tessa sitting in the Under-Gallery. I had sponsored the debate, alongside the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), and I should also like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for helping us at that time. We heard many moving speeches, and we were all glad to be there to pay our tributes to Tessa.
I am privileged to sit on the board of the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, and I want to thank the Department of Health and Social Care for its support and for the roll-out of the pink drink that we have all been talking about. That is one of the many important initiatives that the mission has prioritised. Will the Secretary of State give us his assurance that the Department will provide the same amount of support and commitment to the other initiatives that we have identified? He has talked about some of them. They include the national roll-out of the integrated multidisciplinary care model, support for the first adaptive trial for brain cancer and the Tessa Jowell fellowship programme for oncolgists. The NHS is one of the few care systems in the developed world that does not train or employ experts in brain tumour treatment. Rather, brain tumour patients are typically cared for by colleges and radiologists who predominantly treat other cancers. This strategic programme is really important, as it will revolutionise the skills in the health service to tackle this difficult problem.

Finally, I worked for Tessa Jowell, and I also worked for Mo Mowlam. They were two of the most powerful, wonderful women in this House, and they both had brain tumours. We need to find a faster cure, to ensure that people with brain tumours live well for longer so that women like those two amazing parliamentarians can continue to contribute for much longer. I thank the Secretary of State for the work that he has done, and I ask him to carry on doing it.

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady expresses the thoughts of the whole House. She, too, has done an awful lot. I should of course have mentioned my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who used his enforced sabbatical from the Cabinet due to cancer to push this agenda. I add his name to the tributes. It is absolutely true that campaigners on this subject who have had personal experience of brain cancer either themselves or in their loved ones and friends, as I have, feel very strongly about it, and this is absolutely not the end of the drive. I wanted to update the House on what we have done in a year, but there is still plenty more to do.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Melanoma is one of the cancers that can metastasise into the brain, because it can travel either through the blood or through the lymphatic system. We also know that, although it can kill, especially in the circumstances we are talking about, it is very preventable. I just wonder whether there is not considerably more that the Government could do to ensure that every child covers up in the sun and that more people use sunscreen, perhaps by taking VAT off sunscreen that is higher than SPF30 or SPF50. We must also ensure that we have enough dermatologists in this country to check moles and other growths that people might have on their bodies.

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I agree with all that. Of course, protection from too much exposure to the sun is part of the prevention agenda in healthcare, as well as being an absolutely sensible thing to do.

**Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab):** Like others, I want to congratulate the Government and everyone involved in the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission on making a painful anniversary for Tessa’s friends and family a bit more bearable for knowing that her vigour and energy are still very much alive and kicking through the mission. This is also a painful time of year for my constituents, Scott and Yang Lau, who lost their young daughter Kaleigh to a diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, a particularly pernicious brain tumour that largely affects children. They are working with Jess Mills on fighting that particular form of brain tumour. What more can the Department do, generally and specifically through the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, to focus on childhood brain tumours, particularly rare tumours such as DIPG, so that other families do not have to suffer what my constituents and others have had to go through?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, and I send my condolences to his constituents. The truth is that brain cancer is one of the most, if not the most, predominant cancers among children. Although it is relatively rare among all cancers, that is not true among children. Thousands of people still die from brain cancer, which is why it was right that Parliament and Tessa Jowell came together to highlight the lack of research in the area—something that we are determined to put right.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** May I too thank the Government for today’s statement? I was heartened by the answer given to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), because early diagnosis is incredibly important. There are certain things that people can recognise, such as the effect on vision. Ironing a pinstriped shirt, for example, can lead to an odd effect, which is an early sign. Early screening in built-up areas and cities is quite easy, but it is harder in rural areas, so I make a plea for the Government to consider sparsely populated regions such as mine.

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Gentleman is right that screening is vital. One of the reasons why we are looking at the whole screening programme is that the use of technology has not been nearly good enough. For many people, but not all, that can be valuable, especially in rural areas. Technology is not only used for the screening itself, but for notification and for ensuring that we get to everybody who needs to be reached. Professor Sir Mike Richards is undertaking the review of all screening, and I would be happy to put Sir Mike in contact with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that the review properly considers the impact of rurality on the need to get screening to everybody who needs it.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), and all colleagues for both the content and the spirit of the exchanges that have just taken place. Let us hope that Tessa’s husband David and children Jess, who has rightly been referred to, and Matthew will derive some succour from knowledge of the continuing interest in Tessa’s passionate crusade that exists in the House. We know in our heart of hearts that that continued interest will endure for as long as is necessary, both because of the supreme importance of the cause and because we are united across the House in this. We have huge respect for the courage, stoicism and unrelenting determination to make progress on this subject that Tessa Jowell, in extreme adversity, exhibited at all times.
Domestic Abuse

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Mr Speaker, I echo your words in relation to Tessa Jowell’s contribution in this place and the debate that we were privileged to be part of just a year ago. It is good to see the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) in her place. We are in different places now, but the debate was a shared endeavour, and we were both privileged to be part of that special debate, when Tessa was here, and to champion the cause so well and so effectively.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on a new sustainable approach to delivering support for victims of domestic abuse and their children in accommodation-based services across England.

Domestic abuse is a devastating crime experienced by more than 2 million adults a year, with women twice as likely to be victims. That is completely unacceptable, and we have much more to do if we are to reach a point where no family lives with the threat of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse can take many forms and affects the young and old, male and female, but whoever the victim is, those fleeing abuse must have somewhere safe to go.

Just last year we announced £22 million to provide over 2,200 new beds in refuges and other safe accommodation, supporting more than 25,000 survivors with a safe space to rebuild their lives, but I know much more must be done to ensure a consistent approach across the country and to ensure that survivors have a safer future.

At the 2017 general election, the Prime Minister made a manifesto commitment to review funding for refuges. The violence against women and girls strategy for 2016 to 2020 set out our ambition to provide support for refuges and other accommodation-based services, helping local areas to ensure that no victim is turned away from the support they require at the time of need.

We also committed to reviewing the locally led approach to commissioning domestic abuse services. To meet that commitment, in January 2018 we began a full review of the funding and commissioning of domestic abuse services in England. We have worked closely with sector partners, drawing on their data, expertise and knowledge. This review complements wider Government work on tackling this devastating crime and supporting victims, including our new draft Domestic Abuse Bill.

Through the course of the review we have engaged with specialist domestic abuse service providers and their representative bodies, local authorities, police and crime commissioners and other organisations that support victims, to understand fully the challenges in commissioning and delivering these vital services and the positive features of the current system. We are grateful for their engagement and extensive input into our work.

We know there are dedicated professionals delivering support to victims and their children in accommodation-based services across England. This support helps victims move from danger and abuse to safety and independence, and their children to regain their childhoods. That includes the vital work of service managers and support staff, counsellors, outreach workers and play therapists, and I pay tribute to their work.

However, we also know that we need to do more to ensure that all victims and their children can access support at the right time, underpinned by a sustainable approach to provision. We understand that victims and their children will live in a variety of different forms of safe accommodation and will need support to stay safe and rebuild their lives in all of them. That includes outreach support to remain safe in properties with enhanced security measures, in emergency or temporary accommodation, in dispersed accommodation and in refuges.

Although refuges play a critical role in supporting victims at high risk of serious harm, we have deliberately kept our definition of accommodation-based services wide to include the full range of safe accommodation in which victims and their children may require support. That will help local areas to meet the support needs of diverse groups of victims and their children, and those at lower and medium risk, to prevent their needs from escalating.

Having reviewed the current system and listened to the views of expert stakeholders, today I am proposing new local authority-led arrangements for delivering support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in accommodation-based services in England. The proposals will place a new statutory duty on upper-tier local authorities—county councils, metropolitan and unitary authorities, and the Greater London Authority—to convene a local partnership board for domestic abuse accommodation support services.

The local partnership boards should include representation from police and crime commissioners, health bodies, children’s services and housing providers, along with specialist domestic abuse service providers. The boards will be required to assess need for domestic abuse services; develop domestic abuse strategies; commission services to meet the support needs of victims and their children; and report progress to my Department.

In two-tier areas, lower-tier local authorities—city, district and borough councils and, in this instance, London boroughs—will have a significant role to play in contributing to needs assessments, strategy development, service commissioning and reporting on progress. Those areas will be subject to a statutory duty to co-operate with the local partnership board.

To support local authorities and local partnership boards to meet these new requirements, I am proposing that we should produce new statutory guidance, making our expectations clear. This new approach will be backed by funding from the Government to ensure that services are put on a sustainable, long-term footing; it will be determined through the forthcoming spending review and informed by the consultation.

I want to safeguard provision of support; to clarify expectations of governance and accountability; to ensure needs assessments are undertaken; and to enhance our understanding of service provision across England, through monitoring and reporting. I also want to ensure that the diverse needs of all victims and their children are met, including those with protected characteristics. This is part of a wider Government drive to tackle domestic abuse and end this pernicious crime for good. Our Domestic Abuse Bill, published in January, is the most comprehensive package ever to tackle domestic abuse.

We have also brought in a new offence to capture coercive and controlling behaviour, and new domestic
abuse protection orders will allow the police and courts to intervene earlier. It is our duty to ensure that victims and survivors can receive help by providing the support they need to transform their lives and move to safety and independence.

Through this consultation, I want to hear views on our proposals from victims and survivors, service providers, local authorities, housing providers and other public agencies, as well as professionals who support victims and children every day. I believe that this announcement today will provide much-needed help to ensure that more victims and their families better overcome their experiences, and move on to live full and independent lives. The consultation will run from today until 2 August. A copy of the consultation document will be placed in the House Library, and I commend this statement to the House.

4.16 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Today’s announcement is, of course, welcome. It is a victory for the campaigners who have fought for 10 years for a legal duty to support survivors of domestic violence. It is a victory for charities such as Women’s Aid; for campaigners such as the new Victims’ Commissioner, Vera Baird; and for Members of this House such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

Most importantly, it is a victory for survivors of domestic abuse, who show such unimaginable strength.

There are, however, questions still to answer, which will determine whether this policy is going to work. First and most importantly, unless we provide the funding to make it work, we are setting local authorities up to fail. The Secretary of State has estimated today that the new legal duty could cost £90 million. Given that councils are facing an overall funding gap of £8 billion by 2025 and that Home Office figures estimate that domestic abuse costs the economy £66 billion in just one year, does the Secretary of State really think that that funding will be enough?

The Local Government Association has today raised concerns that the policy is focused exclusively on the crisis-point intervention, rather than early intervention; we need to ensure that the funding does not drain from these equally important areas to pay for this policy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the funding will be ring-fenced? We do not know when the spending review will be; we may not know the outcome of the spending review until this time next year. Why is the Secretary of State risking this policy being kicked into the long grass by hooking it to the spending review? When will we know how much money there will be to spend?

We know that there are issues with support provided to victims only in their local area, despite two thirds of women fleeing to a refuge further afield. Can the Secretary of State confirm that women will be supported wherever they are from? The same must apply in respect of women with no recourse to public funds and those with complex needs, as such women struggle to access beds and are overrepresented among women murdered. Specialised support services such as those for black, Asian and minority ethnic women and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are hugely important but have suffered significant cuts, with one expert recently saying that we have lost 50% of all specialist BAME refuge services. It is unclear how these proposals will impact specialist services, so can the Secretary of State provide some reassurance?

The background to this announcement is a crisis in support for victims of domestic abuse and deep cuts to investment in genuinely affordable homes. The Government are responding to a crisis that their own policies have partly created. A 60% cut in Government funding for local authorities between 2010 and 2020 has stretched our councils to the limit. Services have been cut back to the legal minimum and core services have deteriorated in quality. Women’s Aid has found that many organisations are running an area of their services without dedicated funding from local authorities, and are receiving no support from local authorities at all. That has led to a fifth of refuges closing since 2010, and more than 150 women a day are now being turned away from refuges.

The lack of genuinely affordable housing has left domestic violence victims facing homelessness and squalid housing. This is because last year the number of homes built for social rent fell to fewer than 6,500, compared with almost 40,000 in 2010. The Government’s record on this issue is not good. Attempts to dismantle the funding stream for refuges through housing benefit were shelved last year only after tireless campaigning from women’s organisations.

Although many men are victims of domestic abuse, the majority are women, and women are disproportionately affected by austerity, bearing the brunt of cuts in support services. Ten years of austerity have had a savage impact on BAME women and single mothers in particular. By 2020, the income of single mothers will have fallen by 18%, and black and Asian households will see average drops in living standards of 19.2% and 20% respectively, according to analysis by Amnesty International.

The Prime Minister said today:

“Whoever you are, wherever you live and whatever the abuse you face, you will have access to the services you need to be safe.”

That is a commitment that cannot be made lightly. There is now a clear moral duty on the Government to see this through—not just for the sake of keeping the promises that have been made, and not just for the sake of the campaigners and survivors who have pushed for this change for years, but for the sake of those people who are trapped right now in abusive relationships. If we promise them safety and do not deliver it, we will not deserve forgiveness. We welcome today’s announcement, but we will hold the Government’s feet to the fire until this commitment becomes a reality.

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and her support for today’s announcement. I agree with her on that sense of moral duty—that sense of moral purpose—to those who are in abusive relationships that underlines all this work. She will know the figure that is used: some 2 million people each year suffer
some form of domestic abuse. That is unacceptable and intolerable, and it is right that we do much more, which is why the Prime Minister made her comments today. Indeed, she has an enduring commitment to making a difference in this important policy area.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to all those who have campaigned on this issue, not only across the House but throughout the country. So many voluntary organisations—those very much at the forefront—have really made the difference and I pay tribute to their work, as well as to the quiet, dignified determination of so many survivors of domestic abuse, who have really underlined that sense of why we need to do more.

The hon. Lady highlighted the issue of funding for local government and the interrelationship with the spending review. We have indicated that there will be a spending review later this year because the current spending review period ends at the end of this financial year. It is therefore right that we look at the funding position in that context but, as I have underlined, it is a question of ensuring that local government receives the appropriate financial support, given that a new and additional requirement is being placed on local government as a consequence of this proposal. That is why I said what I did about the need to ensure that this issue is properly addressed through the spending review and that it is informed by the consultation itself.

In the media this morning, I gave some estimates of what we anticipate the broad annual cost may be—a round figure of around £90 million is our current estimate—but I want that to be informed by the consultation and, indeed, to be taken into the spending review, so that we can get the right level of support. That sense of co-operation between areas is also within the duty that we anticipate, by which I mean not looking at this in isolation. The hon. Lady makes a very good and important point about being able to support people from wherever they come. Indeed, that is, in part, what this variability of service, which we want to address, is all about, and what the statutory duty is very firmly intended to underpin.

As I said in my statement, we announced £22 million of additional support for the sector last November. I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has had to leave her place on the Front Bench to attend a debate in Westminster Hall, for her incredible support and leadership in this regard. Obviously, local authorities are seeing a real-terms increase in spending power over this coming year.

I know that we need to do more. We need to ensure that specialist support reflects the protected characteristics—the needs of BAME, LGBT and other communities. There is a need to recognise some of the different types of outreach services that will be needed to give effect to that. The hon. Lady sets that challenge, and I respect and acknowledge her intent to ensure that this Government are properly scrutinised and challenged to see that we follow through. I know that that view is shared across Government. Colleagues with different responsibilities are determined to work together to make that difference.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I join Women’s Aid and Safelives in welcoming today’s announcement. I also pay tribute to the absolutely inspirational Maggie Parks from Women’s Centre Cornwall and thank the refuges in Truro that provide such needed refuge for both men and women. This very important announcement today builds on a landmark domestic violence Bill. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is just as important to commission high-quality services for victims and their children living in their own homes as it is for those living in refuges? Alongside that, we must make sure that there is access to specially trained and qualified mental health professionals.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend. I know that, in some of her previous ministerial work, she was very passionate in advocating and supporting greater focus on this matter and ensuring that some of these issues in relation to the criminal justice system were followed through. I pay tribute to Maggie Parks and the Women’s Centre Cornwall to which she refers. Yes, of course, the Domestic Abuse Bill will be really important. The commissioning of services is absolutely critical. She makes the right point, which others have made too, that it is important that we get the support right in refuges, but it goes much wider than that, which is why we have framed the consultation in the way that we have.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I commend the statement of the Secretary of State. In particular, I commend the Minister for Women—I do not take anything away from the Secretary of State for making this statement today—for tirelessly pushing for this. I thank her for that.

Ever since the first women’s refuge—Chiswick Women’s Aid—was created in 1971 by Erin Pizzey, women’s refuges have been precarious financially. They have existed hand to mouth from year to year, never knowing what their financial situation will be. The reason why this is a very important statement and an important moment today is that it marks the point at which it is recognised that this is not just an optional issue, dependent on locality, but actually a national public policy imperative. We should recognise the really serious step forward that has been made.

I join other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the shadow Minister, in paying tribute to all those people around the country—including in the refuge movement but more widely in the women’s movement—who have pushed for this moment, and also to women across the House who have provided the support that has led to this statement. Will the Secretary of State explain to the Chancellor that we are very supportive of this statement, and that we will expect the Government to put their money where their mouth is?

As my hon. Friend the shadow Minister said, 150 women a day have been turned away from refuges because of the lack of available resources. We do not want the Government to rob Peter to pay Paula; we want the money to be there. The Secretary of State has said that he is going consult, and that is absolutely right, but he does not need to consult me any further because I can tell him what my view is: this is a thoroughly good thing. Will he get on with it and ensure that it is fully funded?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her comments and for her leadership as one of the key Ministers across the House who have championed the issue for so many years. I recognise her contribution in getting to the place at which we have arrived today. She is right to say that this is a national public policy
issue, and that we need to deal with variability to ensure a national standard that we seek to reach through this new statutory duty—hence, the consultation. She clearly and plainly makes the point that we need to ensure the necessary financial investment and support for these measures, and I am grateful for her support regarding those conversations with the Chancellor.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) was present at the start of the exchanges—I was advised that he was not. Was he here?

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was chattering away to the Whip on duty, was he? Oh, very well; I will indulge him on this occasion.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I also pay tribute to the excellent work of Stirling Women’s Aid; Jess Lindhoff and her team do extraordinary work and it is always humbling to be with them.

Domestic abuse support services are devolved across the United Kingdom, but will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he will consider a UK-wide ombudsman or similar to guarantee standards across the entire United Kingdom?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, today’s announcement relates to England, as these issues are devolved. The Domestic Abuse Bill, which has been published in draft format, contemplates and sets out a new domestic abuse commissioner to stand up for victims. I am sure that the point that he makes on the way in which that provision can be applied UK-wide will be part of the Bill’s consideration.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement. A statutory duty on local authorities was a specific recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee’s report last year on domestic abuse. As part of the report, we raised the need for local areas to work together, given that people sometimes need to move to a different area because of the risks they face or to ensure they are safe. Will the Secretary of State make sure that his review recognises the need for areas to work together? Will he also consider our specific recommendation of a ring-fenced fund to ensure that the capacity gap is met and that nobody ends up unable to find a safe place?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. Lady and the work of her Select Committee in ensuring a good evidence base, and in taking that evidence and presenting it in the way the Committee did. We have responded to that today. The statutory duty will do much to ensure a focus on commissioning, resources and delivering against the need in individual communities.

The right hon. Lady makes a valid and fair point about co-operation within and between areas. There have previously been problems, so we have given firmer and clearer guidance on people’s ability to access services in an area even if they do not live in that area; somehow that was previously a barrier, which it should not have been. It is important that we remain vigilant and conscious of such problems as we approach the consultation and what we learn from it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which I support very strongly. It is very timely, of course. A recent Women’s Aid report showed that about a third of domestic abuse services have been forced to reduce the support they provide in the past few years, and that one in 10 refuges received no funding whatsoever from local authorities in the past 12 months.

The Secretary of State refers to partnership with police and crime commissioners. Will he provide additional funds for police authorities such as Cumbria to reverse the cuts in police numbers in order to identify and protect victims? Will he say a little more about what assessment he has made of the impact on other local services, because councils inevitably raid important other budgets to subsidise new statutory services if they are not properly funded and, indeed, ring-fenced?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman heard what I said about the investment that was provided last November and the bed capacity it has given, and about other services that have been provided in that way. There is clearly much more to do, but the number of available bed spaces for victims has actually risen since 2010. Again, I want to see that there is proper, assessed support for the needs that are there, which is what the statutory duty is all about.

Police funding is obviously a matter for Home Office colleagues, but I would point out that more than £1 billion extra has been made available to the police during this financial year.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement. Ever since I was elected as a councillor, many years ago, I have been asking that this be made a statutory duty on councils. But the issue is funding. He made no mention of upfront funding. Will he elaborate on the resources that are, absolutely, needed to provide this service?

James Brokenshire: It is worth bearing in mind the timing. The statutory duty will require legislation to be implemented through the Domestic Abuse Bill that we want to progress later this year. The spending review then talks to the next financial year, 2020-21, and kicks in. We are consulting now to inform the discussion that I will have with the Treasury as part of the spending review, recognising the new burdens and the additional funding that will be required to follow through on this.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I welcome today’s announcement and I am grateful for prior sight of the statement. The announcement refers to England only, although the Government’s draft Domestic Abuse Bill applies to England and Wales, with some UK-wide aspects. Will the Secretary of State confirm that extra funding will be made available to the Welsh Government to support safe accommodation for victims and children fleeing violent homes in Wales?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, these services are for England. Yes, there are various aspects of the Domestic Abuse Bill, as we have discussed, relating to
other provisions within it that have operational impact. However, I will certainly commit to work with the Government of Wales to see how we can ensure that things are well co-ordinated.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, I welcome this statement. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will now ensure that automatic priority for housing is extended to everyone fleeing domestic violence so that they are guaranteed a safe, long-term home and not just emergency temporary accommodation?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point on move-on and how we ensure that prioritisation. There is guidance to that effect, but equally I will look to see whether further steps are required in the light of the consultation.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I, too, welcome this statement, which will be very welcome in my constituency. I have often raised concerns about Jane’s Place in my constituency, which opened in 2017 to provide specialist support for victims of the most horrendous domestic abuse, which affected those victims in a very serious fashion. Since it opened, over 400 women and their children have benefited. The management of this excellent facility have regularly been in the very regrettable position of sending women away because it was full. Ever since it opened, its funding has been extremely precarious. I do welcome today’s statement, but I fear that without funding—ring-fenced funding—it will not be in a position to guarantee that its excellent services are available next year, and to plan staffing and future provision.

James Brokenshire: I commend the hon. Lady. I know that she has spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), about the incredible work that Jane’s Place does. The whole point of this new statutory duty on commissioning and assessment of need is to put funding on a sustainable basis, rather than have the uncertainty that the sector has faced over many years.

That is the intent behind the statutory duty. I hope the hon. Lady will be assured about the approach we are taking. We recognise the need for a lack of variability across areas and for a long-term financial position for the incredible work that is taking place.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s statement. Some 60% of referrals to a refuge service were declined last year, which I am sure the Secretary of State will agree is a shockingly and unacceptably large statistic. As well as providing the sustainable funding that many Members have called for, what can be done to provide capacity in the sector, so that survivors of domestic violence are provided with the support they need?

James Brokenshire: I hope the hon. Lady will be assured about the responsibilities that we contemplate through the creation of this duty, which include firmly assessing the need and demand for accommodation-based support for all victims and their children, working on strategies for the provision of support and making commissioning decisions to sit alongside those. We envisage that step-by-step approach as part of the statutory duty, to assess the needs in a particular area and commission accordingly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am aware that this duty applies to England, but over the years some of my constituents have fled to England because of domestic abuse, and people have come to our constituency from England because of domestic abuse. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that co-operation with devolved government and local councils in Northern Ireland will continue and that lessons will be learned from how we have successfully handled cases of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I commend what the hon. Gentleman says. I know from my ministerial experience the incredible work and support services that are provided in Northern Ireland. As I indicated in a previous answer, I would like to consider how we can ensure that there is a good connection with each of the devolved Administrations, and perhaps we can have a further conversation outside the Chamber about that.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Grimsby has had domestic violence provision for more than 40 years. The refuge is run by Denise Farman, who does an excellent job, and women arrive from all across the country to receive support, often with their children in tow. The service is funded only in terms of the property’s rent, through housing benefit. There is no additional funding for any of the other services it provides, including specialist support for the children—everything from swings and play equipment to talking therapies. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is essential to ensure that this funding is ring-fenced, so that the broad provision of these services is available and sustainable for the long term, and they do not have to worry about year-to-year funding gaps or rely on public funding through donations?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that specific service; I know that the Minister for Women, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is on the Front Bench, has visited it. Ultimately, we want to ensure long-term sustainability and confidence in service provision to meet local needs. I remain open-minded about how we look at this as the consultation develops. The duty is intended to place in the minds of local authorities the way in which funding is provided and the need for services for children or other specialist support, outreach or accommodation-based services. The point of the consultation is to listen and ensure that when we implement this through the Bill, we do it well.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the statement from the Secretary of State, but both the supply of refuge places and whether women feel able to leave the abusive relationship they are in are very much dependent on social security support. What discussions has he had with the Work and Pensions Secretary, particularly in relation to universal credit—we believe that a split payment should be automatic—and the two-child limit?

James Brokenshire: I assure the hon. Lady that work across government is taking place on these issues—in the context of the Domestic Abuse Bill and more broadly...
on the availability of welfare, which, as she rightly says, is often one of the key elements in the support for and funding of rental and other aspects of need. On the point she makes about leaving the abusive relationship, a number of people actually want to stay in a particular home, and this is therefore about how the provisions in the Domestic Abuse Bill work in relation to extra sanctions and such measures. We talk about the concept of accommodation-based services, but important as refuges are, and they are hugely important, we equally recognise that there are other needs, and this is about the way in which that service and such support can be delivered.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This is welcome news, as we have seen by how warmly it has been received. A woman in Nottingham fleeing abuse may be reliant on facilities elsewhere, so the decisions taken in other communities are of as much interest to me as those taken in my own. What does the Secretary of State foresee putting in the statutory guidance about the responsibility of local communities and authorities to work together so that we have a genuinely national network of refugees?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. As part of the duty on local authorities, there is a responsibility to monitor and evaluate local delivery, as well as to report back to my Department about their strategies and the implementation of them. One of the things I will be very interested in and focused on as we look to deliver this is the issue of data sharing, which, as we know, can sometimes be challenging and problematic in other policy areas. This is about how we are best able to reflect on the fact that people will understandably move from one area to another; indeed, that may be an imperative part of delivering their safety. As we look to the implementation and delivery, this is therefore an important part, and I hope we are able to get some good responses through the consultation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend all the work that is done by Rhondda Cynon Taf Women’s Aid, which is primarily based in Pontypridd but serves the whole of RCT. In the next few weeks, it will open a new service in Dunraven Street in Tonypandy that is publicly available, and it covers a whole series of different services that are non-residential, which is great.

May I raise a different element with the Secretary of State? There is the issue of so many women in prison who have now been shown, from substantial academic research, to have had acquired brain injuries prior to their offending behaviour. In the end, because we do not provide proper neuro-rehabilitation to women whose violence has come from a domestic relationship, we are not actually providing proper support and they end up in the criminal justice system, so the victim ends up becoming the criminal.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important and relevant point about understanding someone’s pathway into the criminal justice system. My hon. Friend the Minister for Women, who is alongside me on the Front Bench, has just told me about the £2 million being provided for work on female offenders. That is really important, as is recognising needs in different contexts and providing support in different ways, responding in a much more holistic way to where need is and, indeed, understanding properly the balance between how someone has become an offender while saying very firmly that they can be a victim, too.
Point of Order

4.49 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The learning disabilities mortality review programme is vital in trying to learn from the early deaths of people with learning disabilities. The programme’s second report was handed over by its authors on 1 March. The Government have not published the report, but yesterday it was leaked in The Sunday Times. We now know that only one quarter of more than 4,300 cases have been reviewed and that there are some serious scandals, including 19 patients with learning disabilities or Down’s syndrome having “do not resuscitate” notices put on their care because of their learning disability. That should never happen and it is appalling that this report has had to state that to doctors.

Mr Speaker, has a Minister notified you of their intention to make a statement to the House about the leaked report? That would allow Members to question them on the vital issues, some of which I have just touched on. Some have emerged from the leak, but we should see the final report.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no. The issues that the hon. Lady has highlighted are of enormous salience and there is great interest in them among Members across the House—of that I feel certain. I have not received any notification that a Minister intends to come to the House to deliver an oral statement on the matter. The hon. Lady can, of course, seek to ascertain, through the usual channels, whether such an intention exists. If not, through consultation with the Table Office she can explore opportunities to extract the information that she understandably seeks. I hope that is helpful to her for now.

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill

Second Reading

4.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Government are committed to ensuring that the tax system is fit for the 21st century, that it is designed around the needs of the taxpayer and that we minimise as far as possible the administrative burden for businesses paying their taxes. The Government are also clear that this system should reflect and take full advantage of modern technology, and use that to make the process as simple and efficient as possible for taxpayers.

This very narrow Bill will support those aims in the context of the administration of business rates. This extremely short and simple measure will simply allow us to start exploring future digital reform of the business rates system. The same clauses appeared in the 2017 Local Government Finance Bill and passed through Committee without Division. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) was present during those debates, and I hope the clauses will receive the House’s support again today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister give an idea of the cost involved and what sort of efficient and better system might emerge?

Rishi Sunak: The measure is even narrower than that; it is simply a paving measure, which I will come on to, that enables that exploratory work to start so that future Ministers will be able to come to this House with firmer proposals, with costs attached, depending on the eventual design of the system that is ultimately decided to be appropriate after extensive consultation with the sector. If my right hon. Friend bears with me, I hope his question will be answered later. If not, I will be happy to have him intervene again.

In the lead-up to the 2016 Budget, the Government undertook a wide-ranging review of the business rates system, in response to public calls to reform. As well as seeking views on the business rates tax itself, the review invited specific feedback on the administration of the rates system, including how business rates are collected.

Responding to the review, business groups called for a number of changes to the way the system is run, including switching the annual indexation of the business rates multiplier to the consumer prices index, rather than the retail prices index; implementing more frequent valuations; and modernising the billing and collection of business rates. I am pleased to say that the Government have already begun reforming the system to implement those changes.

Ratepayers are already benefiting from the change to the annual indexation of business rates from RPI to CPI, which was brought forward by two years, to April 2018. That measure alone is worth almost £6 billion to businesses over the next five years. The Government have also committed to increase the frequency of business rate revaluations from every five years to every three. To ensure that businesses benefit from that change at the earliest point, the Government have further announced that the next revaluation will be brought forward from
2022 to 2021. That will ensure that, as requested, business rates bills more accurately reflect properties’ up-to-date rental value and any relative changes in rents.

The Bill will enable us to begin exploring how to modernise the billing and collection of rates. Businesses in this country are of course already banking, paying bills and making sales online. Our tax system needs to keep pace.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Minister seen press reports today that some major companies are calling for a 20% reduction in business rates? Does he have any comments to make about that?

Rishi Sunak: It is important to remember that the Bill is much narrower in scope than the design of the business rates system and how individual businesses pay the bills they are given. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the high streets Minister, is looking forward to winding up the debate, and he will be able to give the House chapter and verse on every single initiative the Government have undertaken to support businesses on the high street. In sum, there has been £13 billion of relief since the 2016 Budget, and a third of all businesses no longer pay any rates at all.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way—he is being very generous. On that point, however valuable and commendable many of the proposals he mentions may be, does he not feel that this is somewhat like fiddling while Rome burns, or indeed many of our town centres burn? There have been calls for a reduction of around 25% in high street business rates, and that could be funded by making sure that the tech giants pay their fair share of corporation tax.

Rishi Sunak: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am loth to get drawn on to topics that are much broader than the very narrow scope of this Bill. However, I am happy to reiterate that I do not think the £675 million high street fund my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the high streets Minister introduced earlier this year is a case of fiddling while Rome burns. The Government are committed to the vibrancy of our high streets through various initiatives that will be outlined in my hon. Friend’s winding-up speech.

Indeed, the Bill is also an important measure; it is a measure that businesses have called for. Given the statutory nature of HMRC, it is impossible to move forward without this short piece of legislation. The reason for that is that businesses today receive separate business rates bills for each non-domestic property they occupy. Large businesses with property in different areas may receive bills from a number of local authorities responsible for issuing bills and collecting payment. It is worth bearing in mind that there are over 300 different billing authorities today, each with its own system of billing for business rates. While I pay tribute to the good work carried out by local authorities in administering business rates locally, the Government’s clear view is that reforming the system to more closely link with the wider management of business taxes led by HMRC could unlock long-term improvements to the current system.

Members will appreciate that implementing any reform of this scale takes significant time and that it is critical that the Government engage with businesses and local government in developing and designing any new digital system; indeed, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton brought that up in Committee during consideration of the previous Bill. I am pleased to tell him that the measure before us today will take many years to come to full fruition. The current intention announced by the Treasury is that any new design of the system will not come into force until after the next revaluation, in 2024. What we are doing today is therefore just a very small first step on a journey that requires an enormous amount of engagement and consultation.

The main measure in the Bill allows HMRC to expend resources on beginning to explore designs for a new digital service for business rates. That is necessary because HMRC’s current statutory functions do not include activity in connection with the administration of business rates. To be clear, the legislation we are considering simply permits HMRC to begin the necessary design and engagement work for a potential new digital service. It does not implement any reforms to the current system of business rates administration.

That is important because, as I have noted, the Government are clear on the need to engage with businesses and local government to seek views on any specific options for reform. For example, the local government sector will want to ensure that any changes are fully compatible with the local retention of business rates and with plans to increase rates retention in the future. Equally, business organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Independent Retailers Association and the CBI will be keen to engage in future design work to ensure any reforms deliver benefits to businesses and minimise any burdens. Members should also be aware that any practical reforms to the system are likely to require further changes to legislation and, as such, there will be opportunity for full scrutiny of any proposals once the design work has concluded.

The Government’s efforts to improve digital tax services are already helping businesses seize the opportunities that digital technology offers. They are giving businesses more control over their finances, allowing them to spend their time focusing on innovation, growth and the creation of jobs. The Bill will support this by enabling HMRC simply to begin exploring potential options to link business rates with the administration of the wider tax system. It will also enable HMRC to undertake the necessary engagement with stakeholders to ensure any reforms work for business and for local government. While the Bill is just a small paving measure, it supports some potentially significant long-term improvements to the current system. I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Opposition spokesman, with the leave of the House, and most unusually, I am sure the House would like to join me in wishing the Associate Serjeant at Arms, who occupies the Serjeant at Arms’ Chair, a very happy birthday.

5.1 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I will not put the House through a rendition of “Happy birthday”—[HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] But many happy returns.
Perhaps this is a missed opportunity. It is a shame, really, that the Bill is so narrow, because we have a good five hours where we could have talked about the real threats our businesses face, the dangers to our high streets and the many representations made on this issue. Nevertheless, this Bill is progress. Following the falling of the Local Government Finance Bill when the general election was called, we encouraged the Government to come forward with non-controversial elements of that Bill. Clause 14 was not controversial, so I am glad to see it in this Bill.

Local councils are on the frontline of government, delivering services that people rely on and which both support and enrich our communities on a day-to-day basis. Labour welcomes the modernisation of tax collection and the move to online payment and account facilities. However, the proposal to develop an online payment system led by HMRC, as set out in the Bill, does raise some questions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I refer you to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a vice-president of the Local Government Association, the body that represents councils, which are the billing authorities responsible for the collection of business rates. It, like me, wants confirmation that the move to develop an online payment collection facility will not change the fundamental and historical role of local councils as billing authorities with the legal responsibility for the collection of business rates. In the design of this new bridging system, to what extent have the Government sought input and representation from local government? Local government has significant experience in designing systems and processes, and it is important to draw on that to make the best of this proposal.

As the Government are investing in digital services, do they intend to streamline this online facility with the check, challenge and appeal process already in place? That would make it easier for businesses to have an end-to-end business rate system in place, marrying in one system the payment mechanism with the ability to check and appeal business rates. What payment mechanism will be in place to transfer funds to local authorities, especially in rate retention pilots? Who will be responsible for the collection of rates, and who will underwrite funds lost through non-collection?

The most critical issue is the wider sustainability of business rates and their role in funding local public services and encouraging local economies to thrive. Local government has already seen severe cuts after nine years of brutal and devastating Tory austerity.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** One of the reasons that there is a reaction from businesses regarding the level of business rates is that while central Government should have been responsible for funding certain services, they have shoved that on to local authorities, which have had to put that through business rates, just like the police and fire authorities’ precepts.

**Jim McMahon:** It is a matter of fact that the Government are moving towards the self-financing of local government. That is fine if a local authority can generate money through business rates and council tax and in its local economy, but if, for whatever reason—usually for historical reasons—it is not able to do that, the Government do not care if councils sink or swim. That is no way to fund adult social care or children’s safeguarding services, or to make sure the homeless get the support they need either. Quite frankly, it shows a callous disregard for the role of central Government in making sure that every area gets its fair share of funding. That is a critical point.

**Mr Cunningham:** Anybody who has any experience of local government—my hon. Friend does, as do I and many others in here—knows that three or four years down the road, though they hint at looking again at business rates, Ministers will come along and tell everybody in local government, “You’re profligate, you’re spending too much, so we’ll cap you.” As I am sure he will remember, we have had all this before.

**Jim McMahon:** The hallmark of local government across parties—is this not a party point—is that people roll up their sleeves and get on with it. They do not complain; instead, they find solutions to the difficult challenges facing the community, but that is made much harder when central Government are disconnected.

Successive Secretaries of State have failed to champion local government, which is why I welcome our shadow Secretary of State having that local government background and experience and really believing in it. I hope he will be Secretary of State in the future, leading on this from the Government Benches. It is critical that the Secretary of State should not batter local government all the time. It needs a champion to celebrate what goes on in every community and, regardless of party affiliation, to fly the flag for what has been proven to be the most efficient arm of government—they are our champions, and we should thank them for all the work they do.

By 2025, there will be a funding gap in local government of £8 billion, and by 2020 local authorities will have faced core funding cuts at the hands of central Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p for every £1 the Government previously provided to cover local public services. Next year, 168 councils will receive no funding whatever from central Government to meet the cost of rising demand for local public services.

What impact will that have? We can talk about the big numbers, and £16 billion is a huge number and has had a huge impact, but this is really about people and communities—the streets where people live, the communities that bind people together and make places decent places to live. The cuts have had a dramatic impact on government services. Youth centres have closed; libraries have reduced their hours, and hundreds have closed altogether; and meanwhile, social care is on the verge of collapse. Warning after warning has been issued, but the Government, particularly the Treasury, have not come to the table. As a result, our councils are having to make difficult and unwelcome decisions about where to make efficiency savings, and that is hampering their ability to prioritise social good above all else.

Moving to an online payment system administered by HMRC, but with links through to local billing authorities, raises a more fundamental point about taxation on business overall. Currently, many believe it operates in a silo and that the approach to business taxation is very disjointed. While our town centres and high streets are going to the wall, the online giants...
are making record profits and ensuring that as much as possible is sent offshore. The Government should use this opportunity not just to introduce a digital payment system, but to undertake a more fundamental review of business taxation overall to ensure that tax is generated where the wealth is created and that our town centres and communities are properly supported. We look forward to scrutinising the Bill properly and to hearing answers to the questions posed.

5.8 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, but I am not speaking for them of course; I wish to speak on behalf of the retail businesses in my constituency, as others have already done.

While I am sure it is well intended and necessary to develop a digital payment system for this tax, can the Minister reassure us that it will not be used as a device by the Treasury and others to accelerate payments and to damage further the cash flow of the shops and other businesses that have to pay it? There is the temptation to use the power of digital technology to have real-time information and then to knock the money off for the tax rather more quickly, when the timing of tax payments may be an important part of cash-flow planning, particularly of retail businesses.

I hope that Ministers are sensitive to the current position in many high streets up and down the country. Large chains and other sizeable independent shops are struggling because their cost base is very high, and they are competing with online retailers who have nothing like the same cost base in terms of property and staff numbers. They are finding it difficult to manage, and another hit on their cash flow from the Government would not be welcome.

Rents are now falling in shops generally in England and Wales, the area covered by the Bill. Some retailers are talking about reductions of 25% or 30% as and when the rents on various shop properties become due for review. That relief is welcome to some extent, but it takes time, because many of the leases are for several years and have to mature before renegotiation is possible. Some retailers must go through the agony of a voluntary administration to secure a change in their rents. Another problem is the fact that rents can go down through market processes, but rates never go down, except in the case of very small shops that benefit from one of the exemptions. So the total property cost does not fall at anything like the percentage that the market is suggesting that it should, because the Government element is very fixed. I hope that Ministers will be sensitive to that.

I realise that this is not the occasion—much as many of us would like it to be—for a proper debate on the balance of business rate taxation and its impact on the retail sector. However, in Wokingham, a lot of money has just been spent on refurbishment and the provision of new and more attractive space in the town centre. Securing the first lettings is an important part of promoting a more active town, but over-avaricious taxation, speedier payments and other changes in how the business rate is handled could offset what will otherwise, we hope, be a good-news story.

That is my prime concern, to which I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), will respond. I am delighted that he will be winding up the debate, because I know that he is very conscious of and sensitive to the need to do more to help retailers, and I am sure that he will mention that.

I should like to follow up my earlier intervention on the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). It would be good, at some point—it may not be possible today—to have a better idea of the scope of the survey and of the costs that might be involved. Will it be conducted by our own Government officials, or will there be consultancy contracts? If there are consultancy contracts, will we get value, and will we be consulting people who actually know what they are talking about, so that we can end up with something that we are proud of?

The Government have a duty to taxpayers to ensure that money is well spent. It would be useful to have any more information that the Minister can give about the kind of sums that the Bill might authorise, and what the purpose is. What more can they learn that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs does not already know from running perfectly good systems for a range of taxes on people and businesses? A fair amount of them are now handled electronically, so presumably there is quite a lot of in-house experience and expertise that could be drawn on. We always want to make the best possible use of the talent that the Government already have and the information that they have already gleaned both through their own researches and by buying it in through consultancies. I hope that Ministers will have some ability to discipline that work and to ensure that it is timely and provides value for money.

5.13 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): This is probably the easiest summing-up that I have experienced so far in the Chamber. I thank the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—first, for turning up and, secondly, for making incisive comments about this short Bill.

As we know, this is paving legislation to enable the Government to deliver on their commitment to link the local authority business rate system to HMRC digital tax accounts so that businesses can manage their rates bill in one place alongside other taxes. As I think should be clear from what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), we fully understand the Government’s wish to modernise the administration of business rates for the 21st century, and we fully understand that linking the local authority business rates system to HMRC digital accounts will make it easier, simpler and less burdensome for businesses to understand and pay their business rates. Nevertheless, as I am sure the Minister would acknowledge, there is some way to go before that aspiration can be achieved, and little of the detail of the new system is yet known.

The Bill provides HMRC with the ability to undertake the planning, consultation and testing that is needed to truly inform the design of the new service, and in their
factsheet the Government say they will engage locally with local government and the business sector in developing detailed proposals and seeking views. It would therefore have been really useful today for the Government to have provided more detail on how they intend to go about this; we have simply no idea about the detail of how they will take this forward. There is a money resolution but absolutely no idea of the costs of digitising, and it would be helpful to hear something from the Minister about the costs that will be incurred.

The Minister made it clear that the measures in this Bill are to be compatible with the 100% business rate retention system the Government are aiming for, but we need to stop for a moment and explore this further, because there is a real risk under the 100% business rate system of dividing the country further between the haves and have-nots, the wealthiest areas and deprived areas, the south and the north. So can the Minister confirm that councils, particularly those affected by austerity, will not lose out under this system?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton said, since 2010 there has been a massive £16 billion-worth of cuts—a reduction of 60p in every pound for some councils—and the Centre for Cities found in January that the poorest areas have borne the brunt of council spending cuts. As a result of these cuts, councils have had to make £7 billion pounds of savings to adult social care, with less being spent on early intervention, libraries, youth services and so forth. In fact, these services have almost disappeared in some local authorities. So it might have been helpful for the Government to set out at the same time as this Bill how they see the whole of the local government finance system progressing in the future—for example, by having more information about the fair funding review and whether the Government will agree to independent scrutiny of the system and its implementation to test whether it actually is fair.

We know, too, that the current business rate system is broken, and we need firm proposals from the Government to ensure business rates are not an impediment to tackling regional inequalities in the way they are at the moment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Lady says that we should talk about that to enable us to have a full discussion here today. This might be slightly beyond the scope of today’s debate, but perhaps she will set out from the Dispatch Box Labour’s position for business rate reform in some detail because we have time to do that, and then I will comment on that in the context of today’s debate.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I thank the Minister for that intervention, because perhaps I was not clear: I was not suggesting that those measures necessarily needed to be in this Bill, but they do need to be set out so that we can place the Bill within the context of the Government’s wider proposals, because the Government—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has explained that very well and I understand why the Minister made his point, but of course matters that are not in this Bill are not subject to discussion this afternoon. As I said, the hon. Lady has explained the context very well and I am sure the debate will not be widened—and actually it is not difficult for me to keep this as a narrow debate.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will do my best to keep to what is in the Bill. However, the Government cannot continue to rely on a system of ever-increasing council tax bills and supplements to make up for the lack of Government funding for our essential public services such as policing, youth services, housing and social care. That is why we are interested in the wider picture, as well as the matters we are discussing today, but I will keep my points as narrow as possible.

The Local Government Information Unit has been pressing for a clear vision for the future shape of the council funding system, and it is worried that councils could continue to fail if no such vision is put forward in the near future. We also need to know something about the redistribution mechanisms that could be attached to 100% business rate retention, and it would be extremely helpful if the Minister said something about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton set out a series of questions for the Minister to address this afternoon. We need to know how the lessons from the retention pilots will become known and when they will be rolled out and whether there will be any additional costs for ratepayers. We need to know who will be responsible for collection rates and who will underwrite funds lost through non-collection. We also need to know how the system will be appealed and challenged, and who will administer the non-payment collection and the applications for discounts and exemptions. How will local government be involved, not only in the design of the new system but in bringing in the arrangements? I hope that the Minister will address all those detailed questions this afternoon. We understand the need for the Bill, and we will not seek to divide the House on it; instead, we look forward to improving it in Committee.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): What a privilege it is to have this opportunity to close the debate today. I wish that it had been better attended, but it is great to have had a contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and some contributions from Labour Members. There was no one here from Change UK or TIG or whatever it is called; it obviously does not care about business rates.

In our debate today, it is important for us to stick rigidly to the scope of the Bill, which sets out how we will empower HMRC to look at digitisation and at how it can modernise and simplify the business rates system. Before the 2016 Budget, the Government held an extensive consultation and set out a commitment to enter on this process. It is a commitment that, following the passage of this Bill, HMRC will then, and only then, be able to progress the necessary design work.

Today’s Bill is an important step towards those reforms, and it will allow HMRC to start to explore some of the digital infrastructure that will link local authority business rates to digital tax accounts. This has been called for by businesses, and it is also being welcomed by them. Today’s Bill is simply the first important step, and it rightly paves the way for further discussions on how the
process will proceed. All those discussions will require legislation, which will pass through the House and be subject to the usual scrutiny of the Opposition parties.

Turning to the impact of business rates on businesses, we have heard clarion calls in the press this morning and from the Opposition during this debate for looking into a more wholesale reform of business rates rather than simply digitising them, and it is impossible to have a debate about digitisation without giving cognisance to that point. Let us not forget, however, that we have committed to £13 billion-worth of savings to business over the next five years through the reforms that we have already made to business rates. We have switched the annual indexation from RPI to CPI, which will, over the lifetime of that commitment, save ratepayers and businesses up and down the country some £6 billion. That is £6 billion that will remain in all our local communities and economies for the constituents that we represent. We have also reformed small business rate relief, doubling it to £12,000 and making it automatic, meaning that 650,000 businesses now pay no business rates at all. We have responded to calls from businesses for more frequent revaluations, which will now happen every three years from 2020-21.

Turning to the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham about business rates and revaluation, it is of course the case, thinking about cash flow and the impact that business rates may have on a business, that it is possible for business rates to go down if rent has gone down and other factors have reduced during the period since the previous revaluation. The last revaluation actually led to a majority of businesses seeing no change or a reduction in their business rates. Over time, that should happen more often with more frequent revaluations from 2021.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I am curious, based on the Minister’s research, about how often businesses ask for a revaluation.

Jake Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. From speaking to business groups—I regularly consult with the Government’s Future High Streets Forum, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has the Retail Sector Council—it is clear that they seek more frequent revaluations because that stops bill shocks. I am sure that my hon. Friend knows about bill shocks from people who have visited his advice surgery, and he also runs his own business—[Interruption.] Although I do not think that farms have a big business rates bill, because they do not pay any business rates.

Bill Wiggin: However, I get continual complaints about business rates from the landlord at the Moody Cow pub, which is very near my home.

Jake Berry: I am sure that those at the Moody Cow will be delighted not just with more frequent revaluations, but with when they can move on to the digitalisation of business rates, which we are discussing today.

People who make the clarion calls for the abolition of, reduction in or some other change to business rates will accept that they are already a key source of funding for local authorities, funding essential services, such as adult social care and children’s services. I note that the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) did not take the opportunity in the wider context of this debate on business rates to elucidate the Labour party’s policies, but those who seek to reform business rates have an obligation to say how the revenue would be made up.

Many people who talk about business rates reform have at heart concerns about the health of our high streets, which was mentioned by the Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople and which should worry us all. The Government need to find a way of ensuring that high streets continue to thrive as shopping patterns and behaviours change. I cannot remember a period of more rapid change in how we choose to shop. High streets must clearly transition from bricks-led retail to a bricks-and-clicks online and offline model, with experiential leisure at its heart. High street retailers will be delighted that business rates were slashed by a third in the most recent Budget for retailers with a rateable value of under £51,000, and that formed part of our wider high street package.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you are a fan of “Sex and the City”, but Sarah Jessica Parker recently bemused her Instagram followers on a recent visit to London, when she praised Timpson not just for its key-cutting service, but for its extensive selection of umbrellas, labelling the branch in High Street Kensington tube station as her new favourite shop. Timpson is of course a fine retailer, which is why I was delighted that Sir John Timpson worked so closely with the Government on his report on the future of the high street, business rates and retail. Leading directly from his report, the Government created the £675 million future high streets fund to support high streets and enable them to pay their business rates. Although all those reforms have been welcomed, people will continue to call for a more comprehensive review of business rates, and the Government will, of course, continue to keep that under review.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) raised a lot of specific questions about how the digitisation of business rates will work. I am sorry to disappoint him, but I am unable to answer any of those questions today because the purpose of the Bill is to give HMRC the statutory power, which it currently does not have, to go away and work up that system. How the system will work cannot become clear until we have empowered HMRC, both on Second Reading and in Committee, to start work on it. That is why it is so important that we agree Second Reading this evening, and it is why it is so welcome that the Opposition Front-Bench team support the Bill.

This important Bill is just the start of our cross-party work to ensure that we create a business rates system fit for the future. Many people who run businesses will now be used to making the majority of their transactions online, whether it be paying their VAT bill, paying their utility bills or making sales and buying stock. If we truly want to create a modern tax system that is supportive and friendly to business, we must all work to create an online taxation system, including for business rates, that small businesses and large businesses alike will find workable and useful in driving productivity and efficiency in their business. That is why I have the pleasure of commending the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.
NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill:

Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.
Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any 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 in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52 (1) (a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 9 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PLANT HEALTH)

That the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 820), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ARCHITECTS)

That the Architects Act 1997 (Swiss Qualifications) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 810), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the Common Agricultural Policy and Market Measures (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 812), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Buckinghamshire (Structural Changes) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 2 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

EDUCATION

That the draft Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 1 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (VALUE ADDED TAX)

That the Value Added Tax (Tour Operators) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 73), dated 17 January 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT (WHITSON)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 23 May, do adjourn until Tuesday 4 June 2019.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (14 MAY)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 14 May, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and for up to six hours from the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Rebecca Harris.)

That the draft Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 1 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT
Ordered,
That Colin Clark be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Derek Thomas be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE
Ordered,
That Dr Philippa Whitford be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Angela Crawley be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Self-build Housing
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5.36 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I wanted to call this debate “Kevin McCloud changed my life and I want him to change yours, too”, but I was told that was not entirely orderly.

What I do want to impress upon the House is that self-building produces houses that are better quality, cheaper and greener. My husband and I were gripped by “Grand Designs” when it was first shown about 20 years ago. I was aware that our French and German contemporaries had been brought up in houses that their parents had built, and they were starting to build their own at our sort of stage. We were thrilled when a run-down house on a large plot became available in our village. We definitely fall into the “creative” type, rather than the “engineering” one, so we got a local architect and a building firm in the village to do the work for us. But coping with the legal side of planning, as well as the design and organisation, was in itself a huge time commitment.

There were definitely television-worthy moments, and I am so glad we were not filmed: the day the glass wall broke into tiny shards as it was being installed; and when we moved in with two small children with only an outside loo and no floors. Thirteen years on, we still love our house. It was built for our needs: snooker, books and vinyl; and a large cooker. Where others have an eating area, we have a hose-down function room for community events. Most important to us are the incredible views of the Cherwell valley from every room.

Did the planners encourage us? No, they were horrified by discussions about reed beds and solar panels, and we had to appeal and argue. They did, however, eventually have the grace to commend the final result. But Cherwell District Council has come on in leaps and bounds since, and it is as passionate about building as I am.

We are building at an enormous rate locally, with three new homes finished every day in our area; we regularly top the leaderboard. But much of my casework is about problems with the quality of build of large developers. We have a wall of shame in my office where we rank how many complaints we get for each major builder. Occasionally, I get their representatives in, in small groups, to show them who is at the top of that wall of shame. I find that that is quite effective, with householders suddenly finding that defects are rectified—safety in numbers not working is effective in those meetings. The lack of quality, as well as the uniformity of type, of so much mass development is a real concern to me, as it should be to Members across this House.

In 2012, Cherwell District Council created Build! to look at alternative ways to deliver affordable houses for local people who buy a share in the property, which they self-finish to their own specification.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her characteristically entertaining and thought-provoking speech. I only wish there was time for me to make a speech. [Interruption.] Oh, of course, given the time, there probably is.
When I was a district councillor, one of my most memorable visits was to my hon. Friend’s constituency to see that Build! project. My hon. Friend agrees that there are two wonderful things about self-build: that she has not yet had time to mention, although I am sure she will: first, it strips out the profit element and therefore means it is much cheaper; and, secondly, there is individuality in each build—the place-making and the village aspect that is so important to our constituents?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Build! scheme is a good example of a halfway house before a full self-build, which we all know is quite a commitment to take on. The scheme enables people to self-finish, and brings many of the benefits that my hon. Friend just outlined, possibly without all the pain of a full self-build process.

We have quite a few examples of the Build! project throughout the constituency, but grouping is important, as I will come on to explain, and one great example is in Warwick Road in Banbury, where there is a 16-house development on the site of a former care home. In creating the project, we learned that instant community cohesion is a major bonus to grouping self-builds: by the time people move in, they know not just their neighbours but the location and type of their soil pipes. That makes for a diverse but energetic community who look out for each other right from the beginning. It is quite extraordinary, and it is one of the very real benefits of grouping self-builds, even in quite small developments, such as blocks of flats.

Another example is in a large building in a car park in Banbury town centre. People in flats next-door to each other look out for each other. They carry each other’s heavy pipes in for installation and help each other with other elements of building. It really makes a difference to how they go forward together as a community.

One of my newest town councillors has just bought a one-bedroom Build! flat near Bicester Village station. She told me:

“Without Build! and the support of CDC”—

Cherwell District Council—

“I would have really struggled to get on the property ladder. At 24, with a single income, I’m not very attractive to mortgage lenders. I bought a share in a self-finish flat. I pay a mortgage and a minimal amount of rent, and hope to work up to 100% ownership in a few years.”

She continued:

“This scheme has allowed me to finish my first property to my own specification. It was a bit of a shock to learn my doors wouldn’t fit over the new carpets and needed to be cut down. I’m in the process of tiling my bathroom, which has been a learning experience. It hasn’t been plain sailing but it will be an experience I’ll treasure.”

That is somebody with, to put it politely, no self-build skills. She is a young woman doing it on her own aged 24. That is really commendable. It has enabled her to have a cheaper property finished to her own spec, and it has given her the confidence to get on to the property ladder. It is exactly the sort of scheme that we should roll out nationally.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this idea to the House for consideration. The Minister and I were just at a meeting of the all-party group on healthy homes and buildings. Some of the ideas that the hon. Lady refers to are coming through in the White Paper that the all-party group published.

Many years ago, before I got married, we did a project for my house back home. We referred to it as grip work—we employed a builder, a carpenter, an electrician, a plumber and so on to come in to do the work at each stage, thereby diminishing the cost factor at a time when, because we were younger, we were pushed for money and did not have very much. What does the hon. Lady feel that the House, and perhaps the Minister in particular—he is a good Minister—could do to help these projects and schemes for first-time new build owners?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman has just helped—by telling us about his own experiences back home. What we can do is promote schemes such as Build! and the slightly more ambitious one that I am about to discuss, which are very easily rolled out across the country and which really can help new, young first-time buyers to realise their dream of property ownership.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have a constituent who is interested in home building, but they had difficulty accessing the register of available land, which local authorities are required to keep. Can the hon. Lady advise me on how that was done in her local authority?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, I will come on to that. My local authority actually has provided enough houses—as indeed all local authorities are obliged to do—for people who want to build their own home. People wishing to build their own house must register with their local authority and a plot is supposed to become available in time. That is not always the case, and it is one of my real worries about people achieving their goals of self-build. I will cover that, and I am sure that the Minister will, too. That is one of the reasons for holding this debate: it is really important that we continue to press for plots to be made available so that people can begin to realise their dreams.

Jim Shannon: I am listening very intently to the hon. Lady. We also have a co-ownership scheme in Northern Ireland, which enables people who are financially restricted in getting a mortgage to buy half a house, and the co-ownership scheme gets the other half. It is also another way of enabling people to get on to the first rung of the ladder and to move forward to get their own place, which is probably similar to the self-build project that the hon. Lady refers to.

Victoria Prentis: That is really important. Often, those help-to-buy schemes, or similar schemes, are not available to self-builders. They are in my constituency, because of a forward-thinking local authority, but they are not available across the country, and that is of real concern to me. The way mortgage lenders lend money is often not very helpful to self-builders, either.

I come on to Cherwell District Council’s most ambitious project and the one about which we really do want to sing from the rooftops. Graven Hill, which is former Ministry of Defence land, is a 188-hectare site south of Bicester. It is the UK’s, and possibly the world’s, largest custom build site. Plots with services already installed are easy to buy, and planning regulations—I cannot believe that I am saying this sentence—are relaxed and
user-friendly. Two thousand custom build homes are being created, and those with a local connection have the chance to buy first.

I encourage everyone, particularly those involved in planning, to watch the fabulous programme “The Street”, on Channel 4, the final episode of which aired last week during Self-Build Week. It is available to watch on catch-up for the next 30 days. There is a shortened taster programme, but you would miss the full experience, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you did not watch the whole thing. Watching the programme is six hours of your life very well spent.

In the programme, Kevin McCloud—need I say more?—provides gentle commentary on the construction process of the first 10 builds on Graven Hill, demonstrating the positives and the stresses and how these houses meet the specific needs of the young, the old, the disabled and the unwell. These homes are definitely cheaper—around 20% cheaper—than other new builds. They are definitely ecologically sound. Just as the build quality is much better when a person does it themselves, individuals are consistently keener to take risks and try new ecologically interesting ideas in a way that big developers simply will not. So far the site as a whole has saved a significant quantity of carbon by sourcing tarmac from a local plant and by recycling aggregate on site. Some 90% of the waste generated at Graven Hill has been recycled, which is extraordinary on a big building site. McCloud does not shy away from the problems—this is very good telly—causing the reviewer of the series in The Daily Telegraph to call for a solid Victorian terrace to live in. However, what is clear is that what has been created is much greater than the sum of its parts. These are not just houses, but Graven Hill custom build houses. Their builders feel a pride in what they have achieved and that really shines through. They will definitely help to build a fantastic community.

There are three major barriers to intrepid self-builders, the first of which is access to land, mentioned by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). All planning authorities are required to maintain a register of those seeking to self-build, and to ensure that sufficient permissions are granted. Some 18,000 plots have been promised by Right to Build Day on 30 October. Will the Minister assure me that this is on track and will happen?

The second barrier is mortgage and financing issues. When we inevitably went over budget in our own build, my husband was self-employed, which caused problems for the mortgage company. Low-deposit mortgages are not usually available to self-builders, and neither is Help to Buy because it relies on the purchase of a completed property by a single payment at legal completion. It is, however, available at Graven Hill for custom built homes. Central Government really could work more creatively with lenders to address those issues, and I would be grateful if the Minister thought further about that.

The third major barrier is undoubtedly planning. At Graven Hill, the council has adopted contemporary planning regulations to ensure a fast approval process of a self-build plot in 28 days. This is revolutionary, and I do not see why every local authority in the country cannot follow suit. I remember the thousands of pounds in rent that we wasted while waiting for planners. I do not really know what they were doing, but whatever it was they did it very slowly. Addressing this issue is critical to the future promotion of self-building.

The Government and the Minister are making all the right noises in policy terms, but real change has to come from creative thinking by local authorities and mortgage lenders. Without it, we will not see the revolution in self-building that I seek. The UK has one of the lowest self and custom build sectors in the developed world, running at about 8% of the market. This is a real way to solve our housing problems, build communities, and ensure good quality and ecologically sound architecture. To Cherwell District Council led by the quietly inspirational Barry Wood, the Graven Hill pioneers and Kevin McCloud—I salute you.

5.52 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) not only on securing this debate, which is customary, but on a really engaging, thoughtful and cogently argued speech. Her enthusiasm for self-build—notwithstanding her own tortured experience—shines through, and she is a great champion for it.

This debate comes on the back of last week’s National Custom and Self Build Week, in which I participated wholeheartedly, appearing on stage with the great Kevin McCloud at the ExCeL, in front of an audience of eager self-builders—a small number of the 93,000 people who I gather were due to go through that exhibition over a number of days. I have also visited the legendary Graven Hill in my hon. Friend’s constituency, which, as she quite rightly says, is the largest self and custom build site in Europe—I am not sure about the world. Graven Hill has been the subject of the series “The Street”, which is gripping us all. My favourite is the black one, which is built out of packing cases. It is a remarkable achievement.

As my hon. Friend quite rightly says, Graven Hill has an effervescence to it. To me, it seems like a kind of latter-day Portmeirion. I have no doubt that, in time, it will become a conservation area—not least for the sheer variety and enthusiasm of the architecture, with a Cotswold cottage next to a Swiss chalet next to a house that looks like a stealth bomber next to a glass box. The variety of homes chosen by the occupants is extraordinary, as is the strong sense of community and ownership that is immediately apparent among the people there.

I know that, as a self-builder herself, my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm spreads far and wide in her constituency and has been noted by many people who live under her supervision. Like her, I have lived with the experience. When I was a small child, my parents built their own home—in the early 1970s, when it was a revolutionary thing to do. They bought a big old Victorian house, with a couple of other families, demolished it, and built a terrace of three houses that still stand today. We often visit and look back with fond memories, not least because my parents also had the Kevin McCloud moment that is in every “Grand Designs” programme where, two thirds of the way through, there is the conversation about money. With my parents, that conversation happened
at the end of the build, and we moved in without stairs. For the first few months, as a five-year-old—or whatever I was—I would climb three ladders to get to bed. I am sure that the EU working at height directive would have something to say about that now, but in those days it was de rigueur.

That personal experience is translating into personal support for this mission, but also, happily, into Government support. I speak regularly to Members who are enthusiastic, such as my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), whom we should mention in this regard, and to sector representatives. They highlight, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury, the structural barriers that can inhibit self and custom build, such as access to land, finance and navigating the planning system.

However, as result of this Government’s interventions, there has been some progress. We have brought forward, as my hon. Friend said, the “right to build” legislation, inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, which requires local authorities to hold a register of people seeking to build or commission their own home locally. I will follow up with the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) the problem that his constituent is having in accessing that register. We have committed over £30 million to English authorities to meet their statutory duties to permission sufficient land to meet the demand on their registers within three years. We have published national planning guidance, in support of the legislation, and expect to update it to help local authorities with implementation later this year. I am encouraged that the demand is there, with authorities reporting about 42,000 people now signed up to the registers, indicating an increase of 133% in the past three years. We will continue to work with local authorities to ensure that the legislation is as effective as possible. However, we are not complacent. If the legislation is not having the impact we seek, we will look to reinforce it.

We have worked with the industry to identify barriers to the growth of the sector in England, and it has identified access to finance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury rightly said—both developer finance and mortgage finance. The £4.5 billion home building fund launched in October 2016 offers £1 billion in short-term loan finance targeted to self and custom builders, innovators, and small and medium-sized enterprises. In July, a Homes England programme to deliver the community housing fund outside London was launched, with £163 million available up to 2019-20 to support community-led groups bringing forward local affordable housing schemes. We expect a similar programme later this year. We have committed over £30 million to English authorities to bring forward custom and self-build projects on ex-public sector land such as at Graven Hill. We have worked with major lenders to ensure that mortgages are available. For example, challenger bank Virgin Money has joined the market, launching new products for custom-build projects recently. As the self and custom build sector consolidates and mainstream, we anticipate that the market will move into this space and provide new financial products.

The self and custom build sector has welcomed our ongoing and wide-ranging reforms of the planning system, including the new national planning policy framework. These reforms will help to reduce the time that self and custom builders have to spend on appeals, saving money and resources. The new permission in principle, which promises to streamline planning on smaller sites for builders and developers, has also been welcomed. We know that there is concern about delays and concerns around capacity in some local authorities. Later this year, the Ministry will be publishing a Green Paper on accelerated planning to discuss how greater capacity, capability and performance improvements can accelerate the planning process.

Hon. Members may well ask why this Government want self and custom builders to build more homes. Last year, we delivered 222,000 new homes—the highest number in a decade, up 2% on the previous year. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 1 million new homes, and we are determined to get to 300,000 homes a year by the middle of the next decade. For too long, we have been overly reliant on a small group of large developers. Lack of diversity and competition has not been good for innovation and productivity, nor for consumer choice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury rightly said, new homes that fall short in terms of quality and character, and that lack a sense of place and belonging in the area, seem ubiquitous.

We now have the opportunity to change things. Self and custom house building is much more common in all developed countries except the United Kingdom, and England sadly lags behind the rest of the UK. If we could increase annual levels of custom and self-build, which were about 10,000 homes in 2015, to levels comparable to the closest overseas country—Holland—we would deliver 30,000 to 40,000 homes annually. Any additional capacity in house building will relieve pressure on the market and other services. Self and custom builders have a vital role to play in delivering new homes that are welcomed in their communities, rather than resisted, and built to last.

We know that a wide cross-section of people are looking to build their own home, and our aim is to make it easier to access self and custom build opportunities. We are working closely with the National Custom and Self Build Association to resolve the structural barriers to self and custom build that it has identified. Like many Members, I want to see more affordable, accessible and innovative self and custom build schemes. I want to see inspiring schemes such as the Nelson project in Plymouth for veterans, and community-owned and focused projects such as the Rural Urban Synthesis Society—RUSS—in Lewisham.

Local authorities are rising to the challenge, playing their part to make custom and self-build part of the solution to our national housing crisis. Councils such as Cherwell, Teignbridge and Shropshire continue to lead the way with their ongoing commitment to custom and self-build. I want to see diverse custom building across the sector, spanning in-fill, small sites and large-scale projects on ex-public sector land such as at Graven Hill. The Right to Build Task Force is working with a number of authorities to bring forward custom and self-build on larger sites—for example, at Aylesbury Woodlands and Tresham Garden Village.

An issue that I have identified, which my hon. Friend will know well, is that local authorities often adopt custom and self-build at volume and scale because one councillor happens to be interested. That is certainly the case at Cherwell, where the visionary leader decided that the council would embrace this and, as a result, has...
produced a celebrated estate. At the moment, it has not been systemised—it is not something that civic leaders naturally embrace—and one challenge for me is to get in among those civic leaders and sell this as part of the housing mix in their areas.

I recognise that there is still some way to go to mainstream self and custom building as a housing option in this country. We can make the progress necessary only by demonstrating that self and custom build can be affordable. I was pleased to attend Grand Designs Live last week and have the opportunity to meet a number of people. It was a great event, and the message that came across loud and clear was that self and custom projects can be built on modest budgets by hard-working individuals and groups working in collaboration. These builds are as much delivered with passion and energy as with materials and finance.

We should also be designing for our changing and ageing society, ensuring that homes are accessible and fit for people of all ages, so that we build and maintain vibrant mixed communities that stand the test of time. That is certainly the case in Graven Hill, where, as my hon. Friend recognised, there is an immediate sense of ownership and community. There is something life-affirming about designing and building your own home. It is about wanting to build something bespoke and individual, with character, that will be high-quality, accessible and enduring.

I want to finish by paying tribute to the National Custom and Self Build Association, which continues to provide leadership, expertise and experience to overcome sectoral barriers and challenges, and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk and the Right to Build Task Force, who have done sterling work in banging the drum for custom and self-build, helping authorities and community groups to bring forward large affordable custom and self-build projects and demonstrating that that is possible.

I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury that custom and self-build can and should be a mainstream housing option in this country. With the measures that the Government are putting in place and the support of all Members in challenging the myths about custom and self-build, we are firmly on the path to realising that ambition. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for her work in pushing and championing what is undoubtedly a critical part of this country’s future and the homes that we must build for the next generation.

Question put and agreed to.

6.4 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEAL TH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Security Situation in Sri Lanka

1. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Sri Lanka.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We remember the appalling terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday with enormous sadness and continue to assess the security situation. Operations are ongoing, and we assess that it is very likely that terrorists will try to mount further attacks.

Mr Sharma: What steps would the Secretary of State like to see the British media take to report more responsibly on terrorist attacks, especially following the decision by The Sun, the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror to publish edited footage of the Christchurch murders despite a public request from the New Zealand police authorities not to do so?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. We all have to recognise that the purpose of that attack—and, indeed, the attack in Christchurch—was to stir up hatred between people of different faiths. That is why it is important for all leaders, both political and religious, to promote a message of tolerance. I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing that, but he is absolutely right to say that the Sri Lankan authorities need to do it as well.

Mr Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One way to improve the security situation is to raise prosperity through trade. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on improving our trading relationship with Sri Lanka after Brexit?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. All Members of this House are proud that the media in this country are among the freest and most vibrant in the world, but it is important that they exercise that freedom with responsibility when reporting terrorist incidents. The broadcasting of the Christchurch footage was regrettable, and I very much support the comment by the Prime Minister of New Zealand that we should not use the name of the perpetrator of the attacks to give him the glory that he was seeking.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): In one way to improve the security situation is to raise prosperity through trade. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on improving our trading relationship with Sri Lanka after Brexit?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I have discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade on trade issues nearly every day, and Sri Lanka is one of the many countries where we want to be able to continue with tariff-free and quota-free trade. We look forward to pursuing those opportunities post Brexit.

Mr Sharma: When will the Secretary of State be able to say anything about the security arrangements for those members of various Sri Lankan communities who have had to go into camps for their own protection as a result of the attacks?

Mr Hunt: If the right hon. Gentleman is talking about people with security concerns in this country, they should obviously talk to their local police force about their concerns. In terms of what we are doing in Sri Lanka, we have sent a team from the Metropolitan police counter-terrorism command to help families affected by the atrocity, and we have also sent the Foreign Office’s rapid deployment team to help families who wish to cut short their holidays.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The unity we saw after the Easter Sunday bombings has sadly been threatened by reprisal attacks against ordinary Sri Lankan Muslims and refugee communities from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Will the Secretary of State do everything possible to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to provide those innocent people with the shelter and protection they need?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. We all have to recognise that the purpose of that attack—and, indeed, the attack in Christchurch—was to stir up hatred between people of different faiths. That is why it is important for all leaders, both political and religious, to promote a message of tolerance. I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing that, but he is absolutely right to say that the Sri Lankan authorities need to do it as well.

Cyprus

2. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken to help to pursue a resolution to the division of Cyprus.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I had a productive meeting with the United Nations Cyprus consultant Jane Holl Lute on 8 January this year, and my officials are in regular contact with her. I welcome the meeting of the two Cypriot leaders on 26 February, and we are supporting those efforts. In March, the Prime Minister met the Cypriot President, and the Foreign Secretary met Cypriot Foreign Minister Christodoulides to discuss how the UK can further support any future settlement.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister join me in condemning the decision of the Turkish Government to begin drilling for oil and gas in the territorial waters of Cyprus, which not only jeopardises the chances of a successful resumption of the peace talks but risks a return to open conflict? Will he call on Turkey to immediately withdraw its drill ships from Cyprus’s exclusive economic zone?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yesterday, I met the Turkish ambassador and had very constructive discussions with him. The position of the UK is that, in line with the UN convention on the law of the sea, exploratory drilling should not proceed in any area where sovereignty is under dispute.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 May 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

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Cyprus

2. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken to help to pursue a resolution to the division of Cyprus.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I had a productive meeting with the United Nations Cyprus consultant Jane Holl Lute on 8 January this year, and my officials are in regular contact with her. I welcome the meeting of the two Cypriot leaders on 26 February, and we are supporting those efforts. In March, the Prime Minister met the Cypriot President, and the Foreign Secretary met Cypriot Foreign Minister Christodoulides to discuss how the UK can further support any future settlement.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister join me in condemning the decision of the Turkish Government to begin drilling for oil and gas in the territorial waters of Cyprus, which not only jeopardises the chances of a successful resumption of the peace talks but risks a return to open conflict? Will he call on Turkey to immediately withdraw its drill ships from Cyprus’s exclusive economic zone?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yesterday, I met the Turkish ambassador and had very constructive discussions with him. The position of the UK is that, in line with the UN convention on the law of the sea, exploratory drilling should not proceed in any area where sovereignty is under dispute.
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it will be impossible for talks between the two sides to restart with a view to getting reconciliation and a settlement while the Turkish incursion into Cyprus’s EEZ continues?

Sir Alan Duncan: We would obviously like to see the de-escalation of any tensions and constructive talks to resume. We are doing our utmost as a guarantor power to play our role in that, and I hope that all the participants can get together and talk seriously once again about how some kind of settlement can be reached.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Did the Minister have any discussions with the Turkish ambassador about the re-run of the elections in Istanbul? Is there a possibility that we may be sending election observers?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I did have such discussions, and I sought assurances from the ambassador that an invitation to election observers would soon be forthcoming, so that the election in Istanbul can be seen by the world to be free, fair and transparent. I believe that we have made good progress on securing such an invitation.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): There has been serious speculation that we may be willing to hand over some land from our British sovereign bases in the event of an agreement in Cyprus. Has the amount of land been agreed?

Sir Alan Duncan: It has been the case for many years that we have been prepared to part with some of the sovereign base land. In that sense, our position remains unchanged.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I have a constituent who was assaulted by bouncers at a club in Cyprus and is now in the regional neurological centre with severe injuries. The authorities in Cyprus have dragged their feet during the investigation, but they have suggested that the perpetrators may have melted away across the border into northern Cyprus, where they are out of touch. Does the Minister agree that the continued division poses a threat to British tourists in Cyprus?

Sir Alan Duncan: I extend my sympathy and concern following that assault. It is not the first such case in which people who are believed to have perpetrated a violent crime have fled to the north in order to exclude themselves from Cyprus’s jurisdiction. I hope that we are offering sufficient consular support, where appropriate, and we will of course follow up any other diplomatic efforts that we can make to pursue those who committed the crime.

Chagos Islands: International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with counterparts at the UN on the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the Chagos Islands.

Patrick Grady: It must be difficult for Foreign Office Ministers to find the UK’s colonial legacy landing inconveniently in their laps, but what is at stake here is not just Chagossian justice, but the UK’s standing in the new post-Brexit world order. The UK must get on board and work with, not against, the UN, the ICJ and the rules-based order. It has to recognise that it cannot throw its weight around anymore. Will the Department engage constructively with the UN to determine where sovereignty really lies for the Chagossians and, ultimately, accept that sovereignty should lie with the people?

Harriett Baldwin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that has never been the UK Government’s position. In fact, the Chagos archipelago has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814. But he can deduce from my earlier answer that conversations are ongoing and that we are making strong representations. The whole world benefits from the security provided by having this base in the Indian ocean.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Whatever the outcome of the sovereignty situation, another issue is that the marine preservation zone has made it possible to protect fish stocks for large parts of the eastern coast of Africa. Wherever we end up, we must preserve the marine preservation zone.

Harriett Baldwin: We are proud of the UK’s record in creating not just that zone, but others around the world. They are incredibly important for the world’s oceans and demonstrate the importance of working together both globally and through the Commonwealth to preserve oceans and fish stocks.

Oman: Shihuh Tribe

4. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his Omani counterpart on the treatment of the minority Shihuh tribe in the Musandam region.

Brendan O’Hara: I welcome the Minister to his place for his first Question Time. I am glad he is aware of the case of the Shihuh tribesmen from Musandam who have been given life sentences for something as trivial as communicating with human rights groups. Amnesty International has said that the convictions are “grossly unfair,” with credible claims that torture has been used to extract confessions. Will he undertake to speak to his Omani counterpart about this particular case and make it clear that the UK expects to see all citizens of Oman treated equally and fairly?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The Foreign Secretary spoke to Mauritian Prime Minister Jugnauth about the British Indian Ocean Territory on 27 April. The Prime Minister met Prime Minister Jugnauth and the Mauritian permanent representative to the United Nations in New York in March to discuss a range of issues, including the British Indian Ocean Territory.
Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. This Government take their obligations in respect of human rights extremely seriously. When speaking to our friends and allies, we make this point and share best practice all the time. As I said, I will be seeing the Omani ambassador shortly and have no doubt that we will discuss a range of issues. I suspect this case may form part of that discussion.

Spanish Parliamentary Election: Gibraltar

5. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the outcome of the recent parliamentary election in Spain on the (a) prosperity and (b) sovereignty of Gibraltar. [910870]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We look forward to working with the next Spanish Government to enhance the prosperity of Gibraltar and, indeed, the neighbouring regions of Spain. Whichever Government are in office in Spain, we will remain steadfast in our support for Gibraltar and will not discuss or agree any proposals that compromise British sovereignty.

Mrs Latham: Given the recent attempts by the Spanish Government, with the backing of others in the EU, to exploit the Brexit negotiations with illegitimate sovereignty claims, can the Minister reassure the House that, whatever the political developments in Spain, the UK or the EU, we will categorically reject any attempt to erode UK sovereignty over the Rock?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I can give that assurance. Indeed, we completely disagree with the language that has been put into recent EU documents describing Gibraltar as a “colony.” Gibraltar is a full part of the UK family and has mature and modern constitutional relationships with the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last year I had the opportunity to visit Gibraltar with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which made me very aware of Spain’s dependence on Gibraltar for job opportunities and economic interactions. Has the Minister had the opportunity to remind Spain of the importance to it of Gibraltar’s economy?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that this is a symbiotic relationship with mutual benefits. If one side tries to do harm to the other, both will find themselves harmed. I hope that the good relationships—economic, tourist access and everything else—can continue harmoniously once we have left the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: So illustrious is the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) that, in addition to chairing with distinction the Select Committee on Justice, he also chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar. His burden is a heavy one, and he should be heard.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am deeply flattered and touched, Mr Speaker. For completeness, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I know that the people and Government of Gibraltar will very much welcome the firm commitment of my right hon. Friend the Minister to our continuing support for British sovereignty. Will he also confirm that, whatever form of government is arranged in Spain after the elections, we will stress that it is in the interests of Spain, Gibraltar and the United Kingdom that we depart from the European Union in an orderly fashion that preserves the free flow of goods and people across the border and our strong economic ties? That will be to the advantage of all sides. A deal is necessary for Gibraltar’s sake, as it is for the sake of Spain and the UK.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend does an excellent job as chairman of the all-party group. Indeed, we were in Gibraltar together for its national day, thus allowing me to be the second shortest Member of Parliament attending the events. As he rightly says, I hope that the good relationship between Gibraltar and Spain can continue after Brexit, to the advantage of everybody.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Of course, SNP Members very much support the right of the people of Gibraltar to self-determination. Their sovereignty should rest with them—and the sovereignty of the people of the Chagos Islands should rest with them. What conversations is the Minister having with other EU states to ensure that Gibraltar is not left behind in the carving out of any deal?

Sir Alan Duncan: We very strongly defend Gibraltar’s rights—indeed, I work closely and personally with Fabian Picardo, the Chief Minister, and his excellent team. Through the Department for Exiting the European Union, regular meetings take place and we make sure we fully defend Gibraltar’s interests. I can happily and readily give the hon. Lady the assurance she is seeking that we will not let it down.

Saudi Arabia: Diplomatic Relations

6. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his Saudi Arabian counterpart on the UK’s diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. [910871]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I most recently met Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs al-Jubeir on 25 April and I also visited Saudi Arabia on 2 March. We have a long history of co-operation in support of regional stability, alongside frank conversations on areas of concern, including Khashoggi and human rights.

Alan Brown: According to his Minister, the Saudi Government’s execution of 37 people was simply “a deeply backwards step, which we deplore.”—[Official Report, 24 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 749.]

But that is only one of many of the Saudi regime’s crimes, including responsibility for up to 60% of civilian deaths in Yemen. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with my
Mr Hunt: Well, we do, which is why we have some of the strictest arms export restrictions of any country in the EU; last year, 226 export requests were refused. The executions to which the hon. Gentleman referred are barbaric. I referred to them and discussed them at some length with the Saudi Foreign Minister when he came here on 25 April. This remains a human rights priority country and we do raise these issues regularly.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there a point where our proper concern for the Realpolitik will be overtaken by alarm at the shocking behaviour of the Kingdom?

Mr Hunt: There are many things that concern us about the human rights record of Saudi Arabia, and we call them out. This year, for the first time, we are hosting a ministerial-level conference on media freedom, which was in part prompted by the appalling murder of Khashoggi. We also have to recognise that we have to work with a number of countries in that region if there is to be peace and stability, and Saudi influence has been very important in the ceasefire that is beginning to take root in Yemen; it started last weekend.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Ministers repeatedly reassure the House of the representations they make to Saudi Arabia on human rights and, in particular, on the execution of dissidents. Can the Foreign Secretary give us one or two examples of where these representations have been successful: of lives that have been saved?

Mr Hunt: What I can tell the right hon. Gentleman is that in the case of Saudi Arabia there is a big domestic reform agenda, the Vision 2030 process, which has involved, for example, allowing women to drive for the first time and allowing women to travel abroad more freely. There have also been some releases of women’s rights activists. Whether that is as a direct result of British pressure or not, I cannot say. But do we make those representations? Yes, we do.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Perhaps the greatest role for the Foreign Office is to be peacemakers. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with Saudi Foreign Ministers, and indeed with the Iranian Government and other Governments in the middle east, to try to encourage ecumenical dialogue between the Shi’a and Sunni traditions within Islam?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the UK, because of our historical links in the region, can play a positive role in bringing peace to troubled corners. The best example of that is what has happened in Yemen. Despite the fact that the conflict was started by the Houthi four years ago, I was the first western Foreign Minister to meet the Houthis—I met them on both 13 December and 1 March. I was also the first western Foreign Minister to visit Yemen to see the other side, the Government of Yemen. We have played a constructive role in a ceasefire that appears to be taking root.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Following on from the earlier answer, I am glad that the Foreign Secretary appreciates the Labour Government’s achievement in bringing in the strictest rules on arms exports, but my constituents will want to know why, given the human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and the fact that it is one of the countries of concern for his own office, we are granting any export licences at all.

Mr Hunt: Let me explain to the hon. Lady what those rules are that Robin Cook introduced in 2001. They are stricter than the European guidelines and say that we do not give arms export licences if there is a risk of a breach of international humanitarian law. That judgment is made by someone at arm’s length, not by a politician, and the Foreign Secretary and Trade Secretary then take that assessment into account when they make the decisions. That is a better system than one that politicises these decisions. It is a Labour process that we are sticking to and the hon. Lady should be proud of it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the continuing crisis in the Mediterranean sea, with many hundreds still fleeing and making the perilous journey across that seascape, what issues are the Government raising with Saudi Arabia to try to ensure that it offers some practical and sensible help for people in the Mediterranean?

Mr Hunt: We do have discussions on that issue, particularly in respect of Libya. In fact, I met the Libyan Prime Minister at the end of last week, and Saudi Arabia has made generous offers when it comes to financial assistance to try to stabilise the situation in both Libya and Yemen. That is another example of the benefits of having a practical relationship with a country like Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah

7. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security threat posed by Hezbollah to (a) Israel and (b) the middle east. [910872]

8. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security threat posed by Hezbollah to (a) Israel and (b) the middle east. [910883]

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): The UK remains deeply concerned about Hezbollah’s actions and behaviour in the region. As the Home Secretary outlined in February, Hezbollah’s destabilising role in the middle east led to our proscription of the group in its entirety. We continue to condemn Hezbollah and all armed militia groups for seeking to amass illegal weapons and arms, and for putting the security of Lebanon and Israel at risk, in direct contradiction of UN Security Council resolution 1701.

Robert Halfon: I offer my strong congratulations to the Minister on his new role; he is a good man.

I strongly welcome the Government’s decision to proscribe Hezbollah in full earlier this year. Israel recently revealed that it has exposed Hezbollah cells in border villages on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. Does the Minister share my grave concern and agree that
were the Golan Heights to be under Syrian control, the security risk would be catastrophic, not only for Israel but for the entire region?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his generous words, and I share his concerns about this matter. We condemn Hezbollah—we could not be clearer than that—and have gone further than most countries in doing so. However, we consider the Golan Heights to be occupied territory, which is contrary to international law. We do not believe that the Golan Heights are part of the territory of the state of Israel.

Victoria Prentis: I too congratulate the Minister on his new appointment.

I welcome the Government’s recent decision to proscribe the whole of Hezbollah, but will the Minister tell me what more we are doing to confront people in this country who encourage the group’s terrorism?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments.

We have proscribed Hezbollah, so it will not be able to demonstrate and spread its message of hate, contrary to the interests and values of this country. I do not think we could have done much more, immediately, to make it clear that the organisation is beyond the law and that people who campaign for or show support for it are committing a criminal act.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Hezbollah, as a proxy for Iran, promotes terrorism and instability right throughout the middle east. Last year, Hezbollah built six terror tunnels between the border of Lebanon and Israel, for the purpose of promoting terrorism and ruining any chances of peace; why has all that not been taken more seriously?

Dr Murrison: I hope the hon. Lady will understand that it is most definitely being taken seriously. Hezbollah is a clear and present danger: it destabilises the region and also offers instability in this country, which is why we have proscribed it in its entirety. That proscription has now taken effect—it happened in March—and I very much hope not only that it will assist in ensuring that activity in this country is curtailed but, more particularly, that when we are dealing with the region we make it absolutely clear that Hezbollah has no place in the middle east’s future.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I too welcome the Minister. Will he confirm that Hezbollah is in Syria working as a proxy for the Iranian regime and the Assad Government, and has played a malign role, killing many innocent people in the Syrian conflict?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Hezbollah is a force for evil in our world today, which is why we have taken the strong action we have against it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Hezbollah is arguably the most successful export to come out of revolutionary Iran. Does the Minister share my serious concern that we are talking not just about Hezbollah but about the presence of the Revolutionary Guard of Iran in Syria today? Does he share my serious concerns about the new threat this poses on the northern borders of Israel?

Dr Murrison: We need to understand what is happening in Syria and the fact that so many proxies of one sort or another are active and engaged in it—it is a maelstrom of such activity, and we need to deal with that. I think we know which countries are behind support for this in Syria, and all we can do is do what we can to maintain good relationships, as far as we possibly can, with those countries in the hope that our good counsel will prevail and that we will be able to curtail some of these unpleasant groups.

President Trump: State Visit

8. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What his diplomatic priorities are for the upcoming state visit to the UK of President Trump.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Prime Minister and I are delighted that the President of the United States will come to the UK for a state visit in June. It will be an opportunity to celebrate our close and special relationship in areas such as trade, investment, security and defence, and Venezuela.

Daniel Zeichner: Many would say that the President should not be getting a state visit at all. In this country, when a bully elbows their way to the front of the queue, we might remonstrate in a politely British way, but we certainly do not reward that bad behaviour by inviting them back for tea. Could the Government perhaps be tactful and polite about this and say that we are all going to be rather busy in June—especially the Foreign Secretary, perhaps—and say that it might be better to reschedule for a later date, preferably long after the President is slut out?

Mr Hunt: Can we just deal with this ridiculous anti-Americanism on the Opposition Benches? One million jobs in this country depend on US inward investment, more than 400,000 American troops died in the second world war, and the President is coming here to mark the anniversary of D-day. We should honour that relationship, which goes far beyond differences in partisan politics.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): One of the first foreign Heads of State I remember seeing address our Parliament was President Xi, who came here in October 2015, shortly after I was elected. This was an opportunity for us to listen to a Head of State from an important partner in the economic community. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that listening to partners and allies, particularly those with whom we share important intelligence and defence relationships, is how diplomacy is done?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I just think that as we celebrate 75 years since the end of the second world war, we should remember that we have the freedoms we enjoy in this House, which we exercise on a daily basis, because America was prepared to stand by our side at a critical moment. That eclipses all other short-term considerations.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Yesterday, three historical allies of the United States—France, Germany and the United Kingdom—made a statement on Syria that was extraordinarily disturbing. Has the Foreign Secretary made it his priority, whatever happens
Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing to the House’s attention the extremely concerning situation in Idlib. We had an agreement that we hoped would hold in order to avoid brutal bloodshed there, and we are very concerned—she is absolutely right about what is happening. I met the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo not only when he came to London last week but yesterday in Brussels, and we talk about all the issues concerning the middle east. We must recognise that America is trying to create stability and security in the middle east, and a lot of the malign forces and the problems we have in Syria are caused by the intervention of Russia, which made it difficult to conclude that conflict in the way that I think we would have wanted on both sides of the House.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on assuming the role of Foreign Minister for the Middle East. I wish him well, and I hope that he has rather more success than I had in solving some of the problems in the region.

In his assessment of diplomatic priorities with the United States, will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary ask that at all levels the US gives rather more support to the UK’s efforts at the UN to bring an end to the crisis in Libya? Would he welcome greater support through the Inter-Parliamentary Union from parliamentarians around the world, including friends in Canada, who are seeking to help? We could do with more support from United States friends.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is very modest about his time in the Foreign Office, as he did an enormous amount of patient diplomacy behind the scenes to try to solve these intractable problems, not least in Libya. I discussed the Libyan situation with Mike Pompeo yesterday, and I agree that this is an area where we all need to work together closely at the UN.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): This House supports and values our relationship with the American people, but that does not equate to a free pass for President Trump’s unacceptable behaviour. When the Secretary of State puts together the agenda for this state visit, may I suggest that he begins with a training course on bullying and harassment, follows up with a science lecture on the climate emergency, and finishes off with a crash course in diplomacy?

Mr Hunt: I just point out to the hon. Lady that the person who is coming to this country for a state visit is the Head of State of the United States of America. There is no free pass for policies on which we disagree with the Trump Administration—climate change is one, and the Iran nuclear deal is another. We discuss all of them the whole time, but that does not mean that we should not respect the office or the country.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is precisely right, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on his new ministerial post, which he will fulfil very well. May I perhaps gently remind those who do not accept this that America remains, and is likely to remain, our most important ally in the world? We may not agree with everything that it does or everything that it says, but this invitation is from our Head of State to its Head of State. We should accept that—we should not be condescending—and these barbed comments, driven by anti-Americanism, are extremely embarrassing.

Mr Hunt: I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is very important to recognise that even today, even under this Administration—we are very open; we do not agree with them on everything—about a third of the cost of defending Europe is met by American taxpayers. We should recognise that contribution, and recognise that the security blanket that the United States has provided for the world over the past 70 years or so has been absolutely fundamental to our prosperity.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I too congratulate the Minister for the Middle East on his appointment.

This Parliament has followed the lead of Scotland’s First Minister in declaring a climate emergency. That was the right thing to do and should be a diplomatic priority for this visit, so will the Foreign Secretary express our concerns about US actions at the recent Arctic Council that meant that an accord could not be signed because the US wanted to water down the commitment?

Mr Hunt: As so many Members have congratulated my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on taking up his new post, I need to do the same. He is an outstanding colleague, and we are delighted to have him with us on the Front Bench.

We share the concerns of the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) about what happened at the Arctic Council. This is an area where we have a number of disagreements with the approach taken by the US Administration. That is one reason why we think it is important that the UK win its bid to host COP 26—the big climate change conference that is due to take place next year—to demonstrate European unity on this issue.

Stephen Gethins: In areas like climate change, trade and defending the NHS, we must continue to work with our European partners in the European Parliament and other institutions to counter the damaging policies pursued by the Trump Administration. Will the Foreign Secretary tell the President that those are backward steps, not the forward-thinking steps that we should pursue in Europe?

Mr Hunt: I think that the hon. Gentleman needs to look at the whole picture of America’s contribution to peace and security around the world. There is enormously destructive behaviour by states such as North Korea, Iran and Russia. American has led the charge in expelling more diplomats post Salisbury than any other country in the world; it is trying to create a peaceful accord with North Korea; and it is taking action against some of Iran’s activities. That is immensely important. We enjoy the benefits of that security, and we should not take it for granted.
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Last month we saw the Trump Administration threatening to veto a UN resolution against the use of rape as a weapon of war unless all references to the reproductive rights of women were removed. Even more disgracefully, we saw the UN accept their demands. Can the Secretary of State explain why a President like that deserves the honour of a state visit?

Mr Hunt: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, who makes excellent contributions to debates in this House, I just wish that Labour got its priorities right. This is a party whose leader says that Hamas and Hezbollah are friends and refuses to go to a state banquet with the President of the United States. The resolution she talked about actually passed. The United Kingdom supported it. We do not agree with America on everything, but we do think we should show respect for its enormous contribution to world peace.

Persecution of Christians Overseas

9. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas.

13. Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I think that today the whole House will want to remember the six people killed on Sunday at mass in a Catholic church in Burkina Faso when a gunman arrived, stormed the church, killed the priest and then set fire to the church. That shows why this is such an important issue to address.

Luke Hall: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and associate myself with his comments. I further thank him for the work that he has done by personally raising on his recent travels abroad the appalling persecution of Christians abroad, especially in countries like Nigeria. What has he learned from those trips about what more we can do, as a Government, to tackle the appalling persecution of Christians in the region?

Mr Hunt: I had a roundtable of faith leaders at the British high commissioner’s residence in Nigeria, and we had a very good discussion on this issue. The main thing that I took away from that discussion is the immensely important role that politicians have in developing countries in not fanning populism and hatred between religions in election campaigns, which is a very easy route to go down but can have immensely damaging consequences.

Sir David Evennett: I welcome the recent publication of the Bishop of Truro’s interim report on the persecution of Christians. Does my right hon. Friend feel that there is now a strong case, based on the bishop’s early findings, for the Government to be even more public and more forceful in calling out persecution where it is identified?

Mr Hunt: I think there is. We will obviously await the bishop’s final report. The concern we had, and the reason that we commissioned the report, was a sense that while we have, rightly, called out persecution of people of other religions—the Rohingya in Burma, for example—we have been more reticent in doing that when it is Christians, yet 80% of all the religious persecution in the world happens to Christians.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Foreign Secretary pay tribute to the work that Christian Churches do in helping, across Africa and across the world, countries that need help? This is Christian Aid Week. Christian Aid does wonderful things, working in clinics and so on. Perhaps we could use our soft power to widen the perception of that work.

Mr Hunt: I had the privilege, the week before last, of seeing the work done by a Catholic charity in the slums of Kenya. I know that former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was incredibly moved by the work of the Churches in Africa, so in Christian Aid Week, along with everyone in this House, I salute the tremendous work of the Churches in poorer countries.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): According to the recent report by Open Doors UK, 3,731 Christians were killed in Nigeria last year—the highest number in any country. This is a matter of huge concern for all of us, and it has an impact on community relations within the UK as well. What specific steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that there are not negative consequences for community relations—for example, within the Nigerian diaspora? What steps is he taking with the Home Office to ensure that it is aware of this when considering applications for asylum from Nigerian Christians?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The best the UK can do is to try to address that problem at source. I visited Maiduguri in north-east Nigeria the week before last. There is a big security issue and a big poverty issue, and because of organisations such as Islamic State West Africa and Boko Haram, there is an enormous amount of fear in local populations. We are working with the Nigerian Government and have offered them more help to try to resolve those problems, so that we do not face problems back here.

UK Soft Power

10. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power (a) in the EU27 after the UK leaves the EU and (b) throughout the world; and if he will make a statement.

11. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas.

14. Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote and enhance UK soft power overseas.

15. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas.

19. Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas.
The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Questions 10, 11, 14, 15 and 19 together. [Interruption.] What a terrible bunch they are on the Opposition Benches!

Needless to say, our engagement with Europe goes well beyond EU membership. To ensure that the UK’s soft power potential is maximised after Brexit, we have already strengthened our diplomatic network, increased programme funding and produced bilateral strategies for each and every EU country. Globally, the FCO continues to support funding for, among others, the BBC World Service, the British Council and Chevening scholarships. We regard that as a key part of post-Brexit diplomacy.

Michael Fabricant: With around 350 million people each week tuning into BBC radio and television programmes worldwide, and with the British Council, which my right hon. Friend mentioned, no doubt have far greater soft power than other countries of our size—perhaps the biggest in the world—but is there more, even more, that the Government could be doing?

Mark Field: We could always be doing much more. From our tradition of democracy and our internationally acclaimed justice system, to our inclusive values of free speech, freedom of religion and gender equality, many of which have been raised in questions today, we hope that we are promoting our values globally through the influence and reach of our diplomatic network.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am keen to accommodate colleagues with very important inquiries. I hope they can help each other by being extremely brief.

Kevin Hollinrake: What representations has my right hon. Friend made to his counterparts about tackling the growing and potentially devastating problem of antimicrobial resistance?

Mark Field: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning that. We believe the UK is at the forefront of international efforts to tackle antimicrobial resistance through a variety of UN agencies. We were instrumental in drafting a UN political declaration on AMR, agreed by no fewer than 193 member states at the General Assembly in September 2016.

Mr Baron: The British Council all-party group, which I chair, is conducting a wide-ranging inquiry into our future soft power relationship with our European partners. Does the Minister agree with our early finding that we could better co-ordinate our efforts, and will he meet the all-party group as part of our inquiry?

Mark Field: We have strengthened our diplomatic network, increased programme funding and produced bilateral strategies for each and every EU country, as I mentioned. I am happy to engage with the British Council APPG, which my hon. Friend so skilfully chairs—or at least, that is what it says here. [Laughter.] I am being a little unfair to my hon. Friend. He is a fantastic chair of the group, and of course I will co-operate with the inquiry in every way he wishes.

Paul Masterton: With China creating more emissions than the EU and USA combined, how can the UK use its soft power and influence as a global leader in reducing carbon emissions to encourage other nations to follow our example?

Mark Field: Our soft power influence globally on climate change is extremely strong and—I think we all would recognise—extremely important. The Climate Change Act 2008 has inspired numerous other countries, not least New Zealand, which is promoting its own legislation in this area along those lines. We are working with Canada and have launched the Powering Past Coal Alliance, and the UK has hosted international zero-emissions vehicles and carbon capture, utilisation and storage summits in recent months.

Mr Fysh: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Somerset on reaching the final of the one-day cup? With the cricket world cup here in the UK just a fortnight away, does he agree that sport is one way in which we can promote British values and strengthen relationships around the world?

Mr Speaker: That is a classic piece of shoe-horning of a very high quality, upon which the hon. Gentleman is to be congratulated.

Mark Field: I congratulate Somerset on reaching the Royal London cup final, Obviously, that comes alongside commiserations to my hon. Friend’s local football club. Those of us who follow league two will realise that Yeovil Town have gone down this season, but I hope they will bounce back very shortly. That will make the headlines in the Yeovil Express, I am afraid.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: sport is a major soft power asset. We believe it does help to project and connect the UK internationally, not least with the cricket world cup that is imminently upon us.

23. [910889] Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The UK-EU sanctions regime has largely been shaped by the UK’s pre-eminence in the European financial services market. Post Brexit, both will have separate policies. How does the Minister think we can sustain our influence, particularly given the flight of the financial services industry to either Frankfurt or Paris?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman talks about the flight, and it is worth pointing out, as I have said—I am the City of London MP—that some jobs have of course been lost, but not to one particular place; they have actually gone to places such as Amsterdam, Luxembourg, Dublin and others. The truth of the matter is that financial services will work very closely together and there will be a mutuality of interests and an equivalence, not least because of the importance of London as Europe’s capital market, regardless of Brexit.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The British Council is a key agency of the Foreign Office. My constituent Aras Amiri was yesterday given a 10-year sentence on trumped-up charges by Iran. Will the Foreign Secretary meet me urgently this week, and will he update the House in a statement on what can be done in this terrible situation?
Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point. I know this matter is very close to her heart, not least because of a constituency interest. The Foreign Secretary will meet the family during the course of this week. I personally believe, as I am sure everyone does, that the sentencing of any individual purely on the basis of their employment with an entirely legitimate institution is entirely unacceptable. We deeply regret Iran’s attitude towards entirely legitimate organisations such as the British Council.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the UK use its soft power with India in particular to raise the case of a group of Christians who were beaten during a prayer meeting on 3 May? What are the Government going to do to raise the escalating number of cases of Christians being persecuted, particularly in India?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he says. The earlier exchanges made it very clear how seriously we take the issue of the persecution of Christians. India is one of many countries where there has been an increased worsening in recent years, and we will obviously take up at consular level all the cases to which he refers.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): May I ask the Minister of State to use all his soft power and diplomatic skills with the French Government over the next three weeks, and urge them to ensure that the 71 veterans of la Libération who are still waiting to receive the Légion d’Honneur to which they are entitled get those honours before the 75th anniversary of D-day on 6 June?

Mark Field: I must confess that I will travel to Paris next week for the OECD ministerial meeting, and I will endeavour to have a line—those from my private office are waiting in the wings here—to make sure that we speak to counterparts about this injustice.

Middle East

12. Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the middle east peace process. [910877]

16. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent representations he has made to his Israeli counterpart on the annexation of land in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [910881]

20. Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the likelihood of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. [910885]

21. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What assessment he has made of the (a) sources of funding and supply for, (b) size of the arsenal behind and (c) political implications for an Israeli-Palestinian peace process of continued rocket fire into Israel from the Gaza strip. [910886]

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): The UK remains committed to a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and we maintain a regular dialogue with our international counterparts about the peace process. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific met Israeli Ambassador Mark Regev on 30 April, and raised our concerns about recent Israeli comments on west bank annexation. We wholly condemn rocket fire by Hamas and other militants. We urge the parties to make progress towards a long-term agreement, and we look forward to the details of Mr Jared Kushner’s proposals.

Nigel Dodds: The successful conclusion of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians is absolutely key to peace in the region; we accept that. Does the Minister not agree that the continued rejection of peace talks by Hamas and its continued commitment to the destruction of the state of Israel are real problems, and that until that is addressed it is very difficult for Israel to sit down and negotiate with Hamas?

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I strongly urge Hamas to desist from its activities. There is no way we can proceed towards a two-state solution until we have revocation of violence. Particularly from his position of strength as a Northern Ireland Member of Parliament and somebody who is well used to these matters, he speaks extremely wisely.

Tommy Sheppard: I welcome the Minister’s condemnation of any proposals to annex Occupied Palestinian Territories, but we know that President Trump will announce the “deal of the century” shortly after he visits this country next month. It might include proposals that support the Netanyahu Administration’s idea of going ahead with annexation, so what will the Minister do to prevent that, and what will he do if they do?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question, but I am certainly not going to speculate on the matter he raises. Apropos the Foreign Secretary’s remarks a few moments ago, we are America’s closest friend and ally, but that does not prevent us from criticising it from time to time; that is what being friends is all about. [Interruption.] The shadow Foreign Secretary is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I gently point out that on 26 March officials in our embassy in Washington raised concerns directly with US counterparts regarding the United States’s decision to recognise the Golan Heights as part of the state of Israel, which is unacceptable.

Andrew Selous rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman does not chunter, because he is a very well behaved young man.

Andrew Selous: A perception that the west applies the rule of law partially undermines our ability to broker peace, so what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the international rule of law is applied equally to the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements and to terrorist elements within Palestine?

Dr Murrison: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right that we need to be fair and equitable, and nowhere more so than in the middle east. I point to the postponed demolition of Khan al-Ahmar in area C of the west bank as an example of a positive intervention. We urge Israel to convert that postponement into something permanent. Although we are clearly friends with Israel,
and indeed equally, I hope, with the Palestinians, that enables us from time to time to give a word to the wise, and that is what we will continue to do on both sides.

Mr Hollobone: While unemployment in Gaza is at 50% and two thirds of Gazans live in poverty, over half of Hamas's budget goes on military expenditure. Would not the lives of civilians in Gaza be improved, and the prospects for the peace process enhanced, were Hamas to spend its money, time and effort on the civilian population, rather than on building up its rocket arsenal?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Good governance means doing the things he describes. If Hamas aspires to run its territory as a good Government, it must address the concerns of its population. I will just point out that we have supported Gazans recently by addressing critical water and sanitation needs through a £2 million grant to UNICEF, and we have announced £2 million for the International Committee of the Red Cross for medicines and surgical supplies, so we are doing our bit.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I join colleagues in welcoming the new Minister for the Middle East to his post. Although I applaud the sterling work that other Foreign Office Ministers have been doing to cover the absence, it really is a disgrace that, at a time like this, we should have 50 days without a dedicated Minister for such a critical region. Does he agree that it is also a disgrace that Prime Minister Netanyahu is proposing to give the Israeli Government and Parliament the legal authority to ignore rulings from the Israeli Supreme Court and to put himself personally above the law?

Dr Murrison: I have to say to the right hon. Lady that in general we would support the Israeli Government, who are the only democracy in the middle east and a firm friend of this country. Where we find that our friends are doing something that we consider to be edgy or with which we disagree, we will certainly be keen to discuss that with them. I will meet the Israeli ambassador shortly to discuss a range of issues, and that matter might form part of our discussions, given that the right hon. Lady has raised it on the Floor of the House.

Emily Thornberry: We of course support Israel, but we also support the rule of law. We can all see where this is going. Exactly one year on from the slaughter on the Gaza border, Netanyahu is taking a further giant step away from democracy and the rule of law by giving himself immunity against prosecution and complete impunity when it comes to attacking the freedoms of Israeli Arabs, ignoring the human rights of Palestinians in Gaza and completing the annexation of the west bank. Does the Minister agree that now is finally the time for the British Government to take a different step by recognising the state of Palestine while there is still a state left to recognise?

Dr Murrison: The crux of the right hon. Lady's question is whether the British Government would recognise the state of Palestine, and I think she can anticipate my response. We support the two-state solution, when the time is right. That inevitably implies that we will support—recognise—the state of Palestine, but in the meantime we are engaged in building institutions that are necessary to sustain such a state. As I said earlier, that means building institutions across the piece, and we will continue to do that.

Topical Questions

T1. [910891] Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Time is short, so I have three brief one-sentence updates for the House. First, following my trip to Africa, I can announce that the Africa investment summit will happen on 20 January 2020.

Secondly, I know that the whole House was greatly relieved by the pardoning of the Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, and I thank the Burmese Government for listening to representations made by us and many others.

Thirdly, I think the whole House will want to congratulate and thank United Nations envoy, Martin Griffiths, for their extraordinary efforts in Yemen, which have led to the Houthis redeploying out of Hodeidah, which is the first real ray of sunlight since the Stockholm talks.

Helen Whately: I welcome the decision by the Sultan of Brunei not to sentence LGBT people to death by stoning, but it is still a crime to be gay in Brunei. Will my right hon. Friend use his influence to urge the Kingdom to repeal that law?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. That is a very good example of some important lobbying by both me and the Minister of State for Asia, because that law is totally repugnant to us and our values. We recognise Brunei is a sovereign state, and it is for it to make its own laws, but that is contrary to British values.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last year, the Foreign Office provided rent-free accommodation in a £20 million mansion to the Foreign Secretary's predecessor and bought a £12 million luxury penthouse flat in New York, but in April failed to pay the cleaners at King Charles Street on time. When they did get the money, it was at the wrong rate. How can the Foreign Office claim, as it does on its website, that it supports “our citizens...around the globe”, if it cannot even pay them at home?

Mr Hunt: If we failed to pay any of our staff on time, I take full responsibility. It is the first I have heard of that issue and I will look into it rapidly. But I do think it is important that Britain has residences around the world, where we entertain foreign Governments and do our diplomacy, that we can be proud of and that reflect our role in the world.

T5. [910895] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Detention without trial for many years is a feature of several countries, in Africa and elsewhere. That does not seem to be core business for DFID. What recommendations does the Foreign Office have on this issue when we engage with other countries?
The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work as the former Minister for prisons, with all-party groups and in raising the issue regularly with me. He is right that we have a range of different programmes. Our new Secretary of State for International Development, having recently been Prisons Minister, is casting a fresh eye on that important issue.

T2. [910892] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State may agree that when we ceded Hong Kong to China in 1997 we had a solemn agreement on one nation, two systems. What level of trust can we put in any Chinese Government that locks up protestors in the Umbrella movement, as happened only two weeks ago?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The hon. Gentleman is right, and we have noted with great concern the widespread concern in Hong Kong about the proposed changes, including the protests of 28 April and the disorder on the floor of LegCo in relation to the extradition laws that are currently going through. We are considering the potential implications, including how they may affect UK citizens, and will push to ensure that one country, two systems remains intact.

T6. [910896] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Has any Foreign Office official involved in the EU negotiations sought Belgian citizenship? Would it be appropriate to do so?

Mr Hunt: Shall I say diplomatically that I was as intrigued by those media reports as my hon. Friend?

T3. [910893] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What representations have Ministers made regarding the persecution and mistreatment of members of the Baha’i faith by the Iran-backed Houthi authorities in Yemen, in particular on getting Hamed bin Haydara’s death sentence from January 2018 overturned and getting him and other detainees released?

Mr Hunt: We have not had good relations with the Houthis since the start of the Yemen conflict. I have met them twice, most recently on 1 March and before that on 13 December, and we are establishing a sort of relationship. We can start to raise that issue.

T7. [910898] Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The Foreign Secretary made an important speech last night at the Mansion House, where he rightly said that “Britain at its best has followed a global vocation.” The greatest challenge facing the planet is ecological and climate change, and it is our duty to fulfil that global vocation with redoubled effort to tackle that challenge. What further action will my right hon. Friend take?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The honest answer to the demonstrations organised by Greta Thunberg and others is that while we have done more than many countries on climate change, we have not done enough. The biggest single thing we can do is to host a really impactful COP 26—the next big climate change conference—in 2020 to demonstrate global leadership on this very important issue.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the new Minister and thank him for agreeing to meet me and my constituent this afternoon, so early in his tenure. What assessment has he made of the chances of the ceasefire in Yemen bearing success and opportunities to help people such as my constituent, Luke Symons, who is being held captive there?

Dr Murrison: I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman and his constituent later. The news from Hodeidah is good in relation to prosecuting the Stockholm agreement, but it is early days yet and of course we await the UN certification that there has in fact been an improvement in the situation—we expect news later today perhaps. We should welcome the progress made, however, and I look forward to seeing him later.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): While recognising our own challenges here, the Foreign Secretary has rightly championed democratic values all over the world, so will Ministers join me, even as we await the formal results of the winners, in congratulating the 193 million Indonesians who participated, on an 80% turnout, in the presidential and general elections recently?

Mark Field: I would be delighted. They are lucky also to have an excellent trade envoy. I look forward to going to Indonesia later in the year and meeting counterparts in the new Government. We have a tremendous opportunity to do a huge amount of work with that very important country.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I congratulate the new Minister and thank him for agreeing to meet me and my constituent this afternoon, so early in his tenure. What assessment has he made of the chances of the ceasefire in Yemen bearing success and opportunities to help people such as my constituent, Luke Symons, who is being held captive there?

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The ongoing tensions between Iran and the US concern many of my constituents, particularly those who would like to see a world without nuclear weapons. Is the Secretary of State considering making the UK a signatory to the UN treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons?

Mr Hunt: We have not implemented all elements of the Stockholm agreement—that is one reason why it has taken so long since the meeting on 13 December. The UN special envoy decided that the best way to break the logjam was to identify the most important part of it, which was the redeployment of troops from Hodeidah. Now that is happening, we will seek to implement the rest of the agreement as quickly as possible.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary update the House on what the Foreign Office is doing to help the British Council employee who was recently sentenced in Iran?

Mr Hunt: We have not implemented all elements of the Stockholm agreement—that is one reason why it has taken so long since the meeting on 13 December. The UN special envoy decided that the best way to break the logjam was to identify the most important part of it, which was the redeployment of troops from Hodeidah. Now that is happening, we will seek to implement the rest of the agreement as quickly as possible.

Mr Hunt: We are awaiting details, but I propose to meet relatives of that individual later this week, because we are very concerned about what has happened. Then, obviously, we will do everything we can to support the individual.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Azerbaijan, a country with a terrible human rights record, will soon be welcoming Chelsea and Arsenal football fans.
What advice does the Foreign Office offer on the likelihood of their experiencing racism, homophobia or other hate crimes?

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** I advise all travelling fans to study the published travel advice, which is always very carefully prepared and which is available on the Foreign Office website.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** It is good to hear of the role played by the Churches in establishing the UK’s soft power, but could it work the other way round? We have a great many vacancies in the highlands. As and when someone from overseas applies to become a minister or a priest, may I look to the Foreign Office and the Home Office to assist that applicant in every possible way?

**Mr Hunt:** I was not aware that priests were on the shortage occupation list, but I shall be happy to look into the matter. My own church has had a vacancy for quite a long while, so this could be the answer.

**Mr Speaker:** I am extremely grateful to the Foreign Secretary. As ever, we have observed one simple fact today: Foreign Office is box office. The level of interest is great; the number of questions continues to rise; and Ministers can go about their business with an additional glint in their eye and spring in their step.
Hares Preservation

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.46 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the killing or taking of hares during the breeding season; to repeal the Hares Preservation Act 1892; and for connected purposes.

One of the things that we all need to learn when we are first elected to the House is that it can be surprisingly difficult to get things done. A Minister who remains in one place for long enough will, slowly but surely, get important issues over the line, but not everything. For me, following my time in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, modernising our rules relating to hare preservation and, in particular, a close season on the shooting of hares remains unfinished business.

Hares are an iconic and much-loved species, famed for their boxing behaviour in March. However, their population has fallen to an estimated 800,000, from what was thought to be about 4 million in the mid to late 19th century. Our hare population is under increasing pressure from food, not shot, as now, for sport. As a result, the 1892 Act is hopelessly out of date; it is no longer effective. It is, indeed, no longer even enforced. It also leaves in place a peculiar anomaly and legal uncertainty in some areas that a game pie sold from the freezer by a pub cannot be sold during the months of March to July inclusive even though the hare may have been killed during the winter months.

My Bill would replace the 1892 Act with its ban on sale with a modern-day close season prohibiting the killing or taking of hares during the breeding season. Northern Ireland and Scotland already have such legislation in place; indeed, virtually every other European country that has a brown hare population protects its hares. We in England and Wales are unique so far in failing to do so, and this is an oversight that must be addressed.

In Scotland, the close season runs from the beginning of February, and I am open to discussion about precisely when the close season should be for England and Wales. My starting point is that at the very least it must replicate the provisions of the 1892 Act and cover the months from the beginning of March to the end of July, but there is a very strong case to have protection at least from the beginning of February, possibly even earlier, since we know that hares are capable of breeding during February, and in practice the shooting estates that still run hare shoots do not really shoot hares during the winter months because they are targeting game birds, and there are also safety concerns in shooting hares in a shoot if they are targeting, for instance, pheasants. What they actually do, when the close season for game birds begins at the end of January or beginning of February, is have another month or two when they run hare shoots; that gives them a commercial income during February and March.

I should add that I am also open to making provision to license culling in certain circumstances to prevent severe damage to crops, or to have some kind of limited farmers’ defence as provided in other legislation such as the Deer Acts.

Occasionally, this House passes small but important legislation, which can get forgotten or even neglected over time. Despite multiple better regulation initiatives by Governments of all colours over the decades, Ministers and Whitehall have collectively repeatedly decided that now is not the time to take action. This House has chosen
not to repeal this hare legislation because it recognises that its intent and purposes are as valid, or more valid, today than ever before, yet this House and successive Governments have failed to take the action necessary to make this legislation effective in a modern era.

I want to persuade the House that now, finally, is the time to put this right and introduce a modern close season to safeguard our hares, because in January this year the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs identified the rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus 2, which has devastated our rabbit population, in hares for the first time, and estates right across East Anglia are reporting a worrying concern. With the instant die-off of hares and many hare carcasses being found, it is clear that the RHDV2 is having a devastating effect.

As our hare population—what is left of it—faces this threat, it is essential that we act now to reduce the mortality of our hare population and to afford our hares the protection they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Neil Parish, Jim Fitzpatrick, Norman Lamb, Sir Roger Gale, Henry Smith, Theresa Villiers, Helen Goodman, Simon Hoare, Sir Greg Knight, James Cartlidge, Jeremy Lefroy and George Eustice present the Bill.

George Eustice accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 390).

Opposition Day

[Unallotted Day]

Prisons and Probation


Mr Speaker: Order. For the avoidance of doubt, I should make it clear that under the Order of the House of yesterday the debate on the two Opposition day motions can last up to six hours; in other words the second of those debates must finish by shortly before 7 pm—my guesstimate is 6.58—not at 7 pm as stated in error on the printed copies of today’s Order Paper. A correction has been issued and the online Order Paper is correct.

12.58 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes HM Chief Inspector of Probation’s recent conclusion that the privatised probation system is irredeemably flawed and that public ownership is the safer option; recognises that the Public Accounts Committee concluded that probation services are in a worse position than they were in before the Government embarked on its reforms; further notes the Government’s decision to return HMP Birmingham to public ownership following repeated failures under G4S; is concerned by the Government’s plans for at least two new prisons to be privately run; and calls on the Government to end its plans to sign new private probation contracts and contracts for new privately-run prisons.

Today’s debate will address the widespread failures that affect our justice system as a result of privatisation. Over the past 12 months this issue has shot up the justice agenda after two flagship privatisations ran aground. The Government had to cancel the privatised probation contract two years early. The failing probation companies had proved incapable of tackling reoffending and were financially unsustainable despite the Government handing a £500 million bail-out to them. There was also the decision to return HMP Birmingham to the public sector after unprecedented failures by the contractor G4S.

Yet despite the recent high-profile failings in the privatised justice sector the Government are on the verge of signing yet more private prison contracts and yet more probation contracts, throwing more good money after bad. But just how bad does it have to get before the Conservative party ends its obsession with the private sector? Today, Members have a chance to show their rejection of this flawed policy. The Opposition motion has one simple demand: it calls on the Government to stop their plans to sign new private probation contracts and contracts for new privately-run prisons. As usual, the Government will probably claim that we in the Opposition are driven by ideology in our commitment to ridding the justice system of the scourge of privatisation, but the reality is that only one party in this debate is driven by ideology. It is the Conservative party, whose insistence that the market is always best has proved so costly to our railways and our utilities and so dangerous to our justice system.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to say that these reforms—as the Government call them; I call them destructive measures—are driven
by ideology, including the completely misguided idea of splitting the probation service into higher-risk services being covered by the national probation service and lower-risk ones being covered by private companies? Does he agree that, although the Government were warned from the outset that that split would be disastrous, they proceeded with it in any event, in the teeth of all the evidence?

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend makes an important point very eloquently. As she says, splitting probation into two and part-privatising it has been a disaster. From the outset, the Labour party was among those warning the Government not to take that dangerous road.

If Conservative Members will not listen to the views expressed today on the Opposition Benches, I respectfully encourage them to take seriously the words of Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former Secretary of State under Margaret Thatcher. Just last month, he wrote in the Financial Times that “contracting out prisons to the private sector has been a serious mistake.”

He also made a point about the incarceration of human beings for profit—which I wholeheartedly share—when he said:

“The physical deprivation of the citizen’s liberty should not be the responsibility of a private company or of its employees.”

Even if Conservative Members do not share those moral principles, the record of privatisation in leaving the public less safe and the taxpayer out of pocket should put an end to this failed experiment. That is why change is needed: privatisation has been proven not to work.

Nowhere has the experiment of justice privatisation been so thoroughly tested as in the United States of America. Members might be surprised to learn that we have a greater proportion of prisoners in private prisons than the United States federal Government prison system does. That is quite astounding. Concern over safety and value for money in private prisons was one of the reasons behind the Obama Administration’s 2016 decision to plan a gradual phase-out of private prisons by letting contracts expire. Sadly, that decision was reversed by Trump. In the memorandum announcing the plans to phase out private prisons, the US Department of Justice said that “time has shown that they compare poorly to our own Bureau facilities. They simply do not provide the same level of correctional services...and resources; they do not save substantially on costs; and...they do not maintain the same level of safety and security. The rehabilitative services...such as educational programs and job training, have proved difficult to replicate and outsource”.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument. He has referred to the United States of America, and I would like to refer briefly to the prison estate in Wales, which presently has 800 more places than necessary for Welsh offenders, many of whom are none the less imprisoned in England. All our female offenders are sent to England. In no way can it be said that the prison estate in Wales has been designed with the rehabilitation needs of Wales as a priority. Will the hon. Gentleman join me and his colleagues in the Welsh Government in calling for the full devolution of criminal justice, and especially of prisons and probation? Join your colleagues in the Welsh Government.

Richard Burgon: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, and we can of course learn from the experiences in Wales and Scotland. I will touch on probation and wider justice later in my speech.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The UK Government are looking at creating new women’s centres. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the priorities in developing policy for women offenders should ideally be the far more practical solution of installing a women’s centre in Wales so that our female offenders do not have to be imprisoned in England? Does he agree that that would be a far better policy response by the UK Government?

Richard Burgon: I tend to agree with my hon. Friend on that point, as on virtually everything else.

There is so much wrong with our prisons and with our wider justice system. It is overcrowded and too reliant on ineffective short prison sentences. It is also too punitive, and insufficiently focused on turning lives around. Slashing hundreds of millions of pounds from prison budgets and axing thousands of staff members have also been key drivers in what we must now call this justice emergency. Across the board, the scale of justice cuts is eye-watering, totalling 40% under the Conservatives. These cuts often go hand in hand with privatisation and, as budgets fall, there is a greater push for the private sector to step in.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): About 20 years ago when I was on the Home Affairs Committee, we visited private prisons in the United States. In those days, boot camps were in vogue: they were going to save a lot of money. They never worked in the United States, however, and that should have been a lesson for the Government here when they privatised the prison service. The same thing has happened in our benefits system. Does my hon. Friend agree that this just does not work in social policy and rehabilitation?

Richard Burgon: I certainly do. I do not think that this Government or our society should see the United States of America as the example to follow in relation to incarceration and justice. People on both sides of the House should take note of the expanding campaign among progressives in the Democratic party in the United States against private prisons.

Under the Conservatives, the driving down of prison staffing levels and prison budgets was an attempt by the current Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling)—who will feature again in this debate, as he does in so many others—to lower the cost of public sector prisons to those in the private sector. That has proven to be a dangerous race to the bottom, and private and public prisons are now far too dangerous.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a really frightening and terrible statistic from the Ministry of Justice that private prisons are 47% more dangerous than public prisons?

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That fact should weigh heavily with the Government. It means that they should not dismiss this debate as being ideological driven and that they should instead look at the objective facts and think about what can be done to turn this situation around. Violence is at record levels,
with an assault being recorded every 20 minutes in our prisons. The number of prisons labelled as being of “serious concern” is the highest for years. It is not enough simply to end prison and probation privatisation, but it is a necessary step if we are going to create a justice system that focuses on rehabilitation and public safety—values that are not consistent with maximising private profit.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): We heard earlier about the need for a women’s centre in Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a tragedy that women, including those who have faced abuse in their lives, are leaving prison today with no accommodation to go to? Too many women are in that position, which is why the network of women’s centres is so important.

Richard Burgon: Women’s centres play a crucial role, and their work needs to be expanded. The female prison estate is a case study in illustrating that short-term custodial sentences do more harm than good to the individual, to wider society and to the public purse. My hon. Friend makes an important and powerful point.

Returning to private prisons, I want to focus on staffing levels, disproportionate violence, overcrowding, the lack of accountability, the extra costs incurred by the taxpayer, and the funds that could go towards public investment that actually go into private profits.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has been making a case predicated on ideology. To be clear, is it his view that there should be no private involvement in the prison estate whatsoever as a matter of principle, or is he arguing for a mixed economy but merely better management and supervision of private providers to ensure equity of service?

Richard Burgon: We are looking for an evidence-based approach. Given that privatisation in the justice system has been such a failure, it seems rather strange that the Government’s response seems to be to carry on digging while in a hole. As I will say later, even answers to parliamentary questions on private prisons often do not provide statistics and answers about, for example, the necessary staffing levels to sort out the crisis in our prison system.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Could there be a compromise here? For example, the service itself could be provided by the Government, but the voluntary sector could provide some elements of rehabilitation and probation.

Richard Burgon: The voluntary sector plays an important role in our justice system and will continue to do so under a Labour Government.

Eight years ago, HMP Birmingham became the first publicly built, owned and operated UK prison to be transferred to the private sector. That is why its return to the public sector after such catastrophic failings under G4S should be a watershed moment. HMP Birmingham was the most violent prison in the country. When the state stepped in in August 2018 and took back control from G4S, what did it then do? It immediately brought in extra prison officers and moved hundreds of prisoners out—a clear indication of private sector understaffing and of the overcrowding that results from the private sector putting profits first.

The crisis at Birmingham Prison was not localised; G4S has failed across the justice sector. It has been forced to give up youth prisons after abuse allegations. Inhumane treatment in its immigration and detention centres has been exposed. The security giant is also still under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office for its role in the electronic tagging scandal, which included charging for dead people. Let me be honest: its role in our justice system should have been suspended there and then, but the Government appear to be in hock to it, which is no wonder given that it has Ministry of Justice contracts worth £5 billion.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could learn lessons from the public sector HMP Berwyn in Wrexham? A measured approach over a number of years has meant a gradual build-up of the number of men in the prison. In addition, there is the fact that it is directly accountable to, for example, me as the local Member of Parliament and to others in this House means that we can look closely at the situation and that we can address difficulties when they arise.

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend makes some important points. No one is saying that the publicly run prison system is without problems, because the crisis extends across public sector prisons, but my hon. Friend explains eloquently that lessons can be learned from the experience at places such as HMP Berwyn. His point about accountability is crucial. With a privatised justice system and private prisons, accountability, which is so important for our democracy and so important to turn the justice crisis around, is sadly deficient.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On accountability, the previous Prisons Minister, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), was going to resign if he did not improve the prisons, so I wonder whether we will hear about the current Prisons Minister’s attitude to that. The previous pledge was based on improvements at 10 institutions, including Wormwood Scrubs in my constituency, but of course there are another hundred or so prisons. We want to get away from this ad hoc approach. We need consistency across the Prison Service.

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend, who makes an important point, has always been a passionate advocate for the improvement of conditions at Wormwood Scrubs. He is right that the former Prisons Minister had pledged to disappear from that role if he did not improve things in those 10 prisons.

Andy Slaughter: He has! [Laughter.]

Richard Burgon: He has, but under different circumstances. The key point is that the 10 prisons were cherry-picked and were not the 10 worst. If we are to turn this justice crisis around, we need a serious, measured, objective approach based on the evidence, not on chasing headlines for political promotion.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the statistic that there are 47% more violent incidents in private prisons than in those in the public estate, revealed in The Guardian yesterday, is truly shocking? We hope to hear more from Government Members about how they are going to tackle that dreadful new finding.
Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend is completely correct. The statistic she refers to demands a constructive response from the Government in this debate. Given statistics such as those revealed in The Guardian yesterday, the Government cannot just dismiss this Opposition motion as an ideological fixation.

Last year, the Sodexo-run Peterborough Prison became the first women’s jail in years to be deemed insufficiently safe, showing that the problem goes far beyond the failings of one company—the aforementioned G4S—because this is about the failure of an entire ideology. Serco, where the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), once worked as a spin doctor and which has Ministry of Justice contracts worth £2.5 billion, was forced to repay millions of pounds after scandals involving separate contracts for tagging and for escorting prisoners to court. Despite repeated failures, the 13 private prisons currently managed by G4S, Serco and Sodexo are set to be added to, starting with Wellingborough and then Glen Parva. The new prisons are to be built using the Birmingham model—built with public money and then handed over to the private sector to make profits at public expense.

Who will run the new prisons? Have the Government learned lessons from the failings of G4S and the like? Sadly, in response to my written parliamentary questions, the Government have refused to tell me who is most likely to run them, hiding behind the cloak of commercial sensitivity. However, the Secretary of State has indicated that G4S, Sodexo and Serco are all interested, so I wonder whether he will say today that he will exclude the companies that currently run prisons from bidding, given their record of failure. I have already asked him this question in writing, but why have the Government decided to ban the public sector from even bidding to run new prisons at Wellingborough and Glen Parva? Given that most prisons are in the public sector, it seems strange that the public sector is to be banned from competing in the bidding process. Some may conclude that the system has been stacked in favour of the private sector again.

There is a lack of openness about who will be running the private prisons, something which I have come up against time and again when raising my concerns. Requests for information about a key public service that should be available are denied due to commercial sensitivities, which is surely not right. One method of cost cutting for private prisons is obviously to cut staffing levels, even though understaffing is a key driver of prison violence, and there are real fears that that is happening. However, the Government refuse to reveal how many officers are employed at private prisons, despite numerous parliamentary questions and even requests from members of the Select Committee on Justice.

The prison officers’ union has raised concerns that private prisons have higher prisoner-to-officer ratios than public prisons, yet the Justice Secretary recently told me that his Department “does not mandate staffing numbers in privately operated prisons. It is the responsibility of the contractor to determine and maintain the number of staff necessary to discharge the requirements of the contract.” It is simply bizarre that state prisons have to publish staffing figures quarterly but private prisons do not. Again, we see how the private sector is allowed to hide in a shroud of secrecy while delivering public services.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about the level of violence as a result of higher prisoner-to-staff ratios but about the lack of rehabilitation services and the inability of staff to help inmates to learn, for instance, how to read and write? That is one of the reasons for reoffending when they come out.

Richard Burgon: That is an important point. Rehabilitation is key to an effective criminal justice system and to turning lives around and keeping communities safer. It is not just about violence; it is also about the failure to offer proper rehabilitation programmes, properly staffed and properly funded.

Opposition Members, experts and staff believe that private firms could be deliberately understaffing prisons to boost their profits. It is clearly in the public interest that staffing levels in private prisons be routinely published, just as they are routinely published for publicly run prisons.

If the Government want to reassure the public that private profit is not being put before the safety of prisoners, staff and wider society, will the Secretary of State today commit to making private companies come clean on staffing levels and publish them on the same terms as public prisons do? That is a very reasonable request.

One set of data that private prisons do have to publish is on assaults, which only adds to fears that privatisation is putting rehabilitation at risk. I put on record the shocking new figures that came to light in The Guardian yesterday, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) alluded, on the scale of violence in private prisons. The figures come from an analysis of the Government’s answers to my parliamentary questions, so there is no doubt about their accuracy.

Despite comprising just 13% of adult prisons, private prisons are disproportionately represented among the most violent. Three of the 10 most violent adult prisons are private—that is 30%—as are five of the top 20, or 25%. In the most violent category, male local prisons, four of the five private prisons have an above-average level of assaults. That is 80% of all such private prisons. The figures show that private male local prisons are over 40% more violent than their public equivalents.

Labour has made it clear that, in office, we will scrap privately run prisons. The Tories should follow Labour’s lead and drop their ideological obsession with privatisation but, if they will not, the very least they should do—in the light of these figures and the other issues of safety, transparency and accountability that I have set out—is halt plans for more private prisons and establish an independent inquiry into whether privatisation is creating a threat to safety in our prison system. Again a very reasonable request, and I look forward to the Secretary of State’s answer.

Private prisons are also disproportionately overcrowded, with the 2018 House of Commons Library briefing suggesting that, although just over half of public sector prisons are overcrowded, this rises to 83% in the private sector. The fear is a simple one: more prisoners means more money for private operators, which is one of the many perverse incentives created by running prisons for profit. More analysis is needed on those figures. Again, an independent inquiry could look into whether private prisons are, indeed, more overcrowded.
As I have mentioned, the slash-and-burn approach to prison staffing and budgets was an attempt to drive down public sector costs to those of the private sector. That was done under the tenure at the Ministry of Justice of the current Secretary of State for Transport. Perhaps he should be responding to this debate, as our justice system is full of examples of his dangerous obsession with outsourcing and privatisation. It is not too late for his successor to take a different course.

Prison maintenance, for example, was privatised in 2015, with contracts worth around £500 million handed to Carillion and Amey. The £115 million planned savings to the state never materialised, but our prisons paid the price. Cells were left with smashed windows, while inmates lived in squalor and, in some cases, were unable to access towels and even soap.

Take HMP Liverpool. Inspectors found the prison to be rat-infested, with Dickensian conditions as thousands of basic maintenance jobs had not been completed. After the collapse of Carillion, the Ministry of Justice set up a new public facilities management company to replace the work of Carillion, but it has refused to rule out reprivatising this work, and let us be clear that Amey is still underperforming in too many prisons. Will the Justice Secretary commit today to bringing all maintenance contracts back in-house when they expire?

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and some excellent points. One of the findings of the Environmental Audit Committee’s review of sustainability practices in the Ministry of Justice is that contractors are unaware of their obligations. One site of special scientific interest, an important nature area, was being mown by the contractor with no oversight of the environmental sustainability issues at the prison. Does he agree that any new contracts must be managed in-house in order to have control over the future sustainability of the prisons estate?

Mr Speaker: Order. Notwithstanding colleagues’ appetite for interrogation, which is often insatiable, and the natural courtesy of the shadow Secretary of State in wanting to accommodate colleagues, I am cautiously optimistic that he is approaching his peroration simply because of the number of colleagues who wish to contribute to the debate. That is not binding. I am merely expressing my cautious optimism.

Richard Burgon: This House is a place for cautious optimism, which is very appropriate—not perhaps on all sides.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) makes an important point about environmental sustainability. When there is not sufficient accountability, when profit is being pursued, the price is often paid not only by prisoners and wider society but by the environment. I am glad that the public are increasingly mindful of those important issues.

In 2013 the then Justice Secretary announced the break-up and part-privatisation of the award-winning probation service. Can anyone guess who it was? Of course, it was the current Transport Secretary. Probation does not get the attention of the Prison Service, but it should because it manages a quarter of a million offenders in our communities—around 400 in each constituency on average.

After part-privatisation, 21 private sector community rehabilitation companies manage, or rather mismanage, 150,000 offenders. The Conservatives’ part-privatisation of probation has been a reckless and costly experiment that has failed to protect the public, fragmenting and damaging an award-winning service. Serious reoffending has soared, supervision is severely overstretched and hundreds of millions of pounds have been wasted on bailing out a broken system. It could well be the current Transport Secretary’s most damaging failure—a high bar indeed.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Burgon: I will give way on this last occasion.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. The HMI Prisons report on the CRC in York highlighted the devastating impact on the morale of probation officers, who do fantastic work, particularly due to the change in culture and excessive workloads. Is that not only completely unacceptable but detrimental to those who depend on the probation service for their rehabilitation?

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend is right to be a passionate advocate of the important work, done in difficult circumstances, by our probation workers. They need to be valued more. Their importance in our justice system needs to be more fully recognised by this Government. Ending the part-privatisation of probation would be one way of doing that. What was an award-winning service is now fragmented and damaged. The level of serious reoffending has soared, supervision is seriously overstretched and hundreds of millions of pounds have been wasted in bailing out a broken system.

The National Audit Office, parliamentary Committees, the chief inspector of probation, trade unions and many more have all condemned this botched probation privatisation programme. Indeed, the chief inspector, in this year’s annual report, labelled the system “irredeemably flawed”. She flagged a catalogue of deep-rooted problems, including the number of probation professionals being at a critical level, with too much reliance on unqualified or agency staff; eight out of 10 community rehabilitation companies inspected since January last year being rated as inadequate; more needing to be done to keep victims safe and to safeguard children; and the fact that a lack of judicial confidence in probation and community punishments may be leading to more custodial sentences in cases that are borderline. She concluded that public ownership is a safer option for the core work, while improvements are not likely “while probation remains subject to the pressures of commerce”. There is really no need to add to that. The chief inspector has concluded that public ownership is a safer option and said that the fact that probation remains subject to the pressures of commerce means that improvements are not likely.

With private probation contracts now ending two years early, Ministers have the perfect opportunity to listen to the experts, reunify this fractured service and remove the profit motive and for all. As we have heard, the current Transport Secretary ignored all the warnings from the Labour party and others, including unions, probation trusts and the voluntary sector, of the
obvious dangers of privatising probation. It is essential that the current Justice Secretary learns from his Government’s mistakes, but so far the Government have said that they will be renewing the private sector contracts and in a way that appears mainly designed to help the companies become more financially stable.

**Mary Creagh:** Wakefield has two prisons—the women’s prison, New Hall, and Wakefield, a high-security establishment—so this is of great concern to my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the previous Justice Secretary’s decision to abolish local probation trusts and to introduce the profit model into this was one of the worst examples of the reckless, untested and ideology-driven decisions that this Government have made?

**Richard Burgon:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head.

I am now coming to my conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Conservatives now need to drop this dangerous obsession with running probation for private profit and bring it back in-house, where it can focus on keeping the public safe. We are committed to ending the Conservatives’ failed privatisation of probation and returning the service to the public sector. The former chief inspector of prisons, Lord Ramsbotham, is overseeing our important review of how we best return probation to the public sector. I will be publishing Lord Ramsbotham’s interim report this week. I hope the Secretary of State will meet me to discuss this important report.

Throughout our justice system, outsourcing has been used to lower costs by cutting the pay and conditions of the lowest-paid workers. The people who clean the Secretary of State’s office, for example, and the security guards who keep the Ministry of Justice safe have been demanding a real living wage of £10 an hour, so will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to commit to ensuring that all staff in his Department, including those working under outsourced contracts, actually get the real living wage?

In conclusion, the Conservatives promised that privatisation of our justice system would lead to better services and lower costs. The evidence is now in: it has achieved neither. Instead of savings, we have had bail-outs; instead of improving safety, there is disproportionate violence; and instead of accountability, we have had secrecy. Even in the United States of America this debate on a privatised justice system is moving on—it must move on here, too. The Government must now face the facts: privatisation has failed. When in a hole, stop digging. The Government should scrap plans for yet more private prisons and private probation contracts. For those reasons, I commend this motion to the House.

1.35 pm

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke):** There is an important debate to be had about the involvement of the private sector and the voluntary sector in our justice system. It is right that we ask ourselves: how do we provide high-quality public services? How do we encourage innovation in order to raise standards? And how do we deliver the best possible value for money for the taxpayer? In answering these questions, there will always be debates about whether the private sector or the voluntary sector does too much or too little: do we make use of these sectors in the right way? Do we have the right incentives? And do we have the right supervision? In reaching a fair-minded conclusion, we should approach the evidence in a fair-minded way, looking at good and bad examples, and acknowledging where things work well and where they do not.

I have to say that such a balanced approach was entirely lacking in the speech we have just heard from the shadow Secretary of State. In a fairly lengthy speech, he had time to address this in a proper, balanced way. Instead, what we heard was simplistic, dogmatic and bombastic. The only thing anyone on this side of the House will remember about his speech is his abiding hostility to the private sector. Mind you, at least we will remember something from his speech, which, given his reputation, is more than he will ever do.

On prisons, the hon. Gentleman repeatedly made reference to the difficulties with HMP Birmingham. There is no doubt—I acknowledge this—that Birmingham was a failing prison and the standards at the time of the inspection were unacceptable. Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service had been working closely with G4S to try to resolve the issues, but it became increasingly clear that G4S alone was not able to make the improvements that were so badly needed. That is why we took the decision to step in, doing so at no additional cost to the taxpayer. It was right that we did that. The point I want to make is that where we believe it is right to step in and where we believe the private sector is not the right answer, we will step in.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State just tell the House why it took an inspection by the prisons inspector to discover that G4S was failing in Birmingham and why this did not come from his own Department?

**Mr Gauke:** HMPPS did have concerns about how Birmingham was operating and the way it was working, and HMPPS was working closely with G4S to try to address this. It became clear, when the inspection was undertaken, that we were required to go further and that the level of intervention we had previously put in was insufficient. That is why we took the steps we did. We stepped in, putting one of our best prison service governors in charge, alongside a strong senior management team and 30 additional experienced staff. I would like to thank all of them for their hard work since we took that decision to turn around a complex and challenging establishment.

**Catherine West:** Will the Secretary of State admit that this is not just about one prison and that yesterday’s figures in The Guardian showing 47% more incidents of violence in the private estate than in the public point to something greater than one, one-off prison?

**Mr Gauke:** When looking at prisons, it is important to compare like with like. Our prison estate contains a range of prisons doing different tasks, with different cohorts of prisoners, which creates different challenges. It is right that we look beyond just one prison, as the hon. Lady rightly says, and that we look beyond HMP Birmingham, where we see that the position is much more complex. The House should not just take my word for it: the chief inspector of prisons has highlighted many examples of excellent performance by private
prisons in his inspection reports. For example, let us take HMP Altcourse, which is run by G4S. Its latest inspection highlighted how “violence and self-harm were decreasing year on year”, and said: “Purposeful activity was excellent”. It is worth pointing out that HMP Altcourse is not far from HMP Liverpool. They are in the same city and have the same type of prisoner, but we have had significant difficulties with HMP Liverpool. We hope and believe that it is on the mend, but it was none the less one of our most troubling prisons.

The House could also consider young offenders institutions. At Parc, which is also run by G4S, the inspectorate found that “the establishment was characterised by good relationships, excellent multidisciplinary work and strong leadership.”

We can also look at HMP Bronzefield, which is run by Sodexo. It was described by HMIP as “an excellent institution where outcomes for the prisoners held were reasonably good or better against all our tests of a healthy prison.”

If we put ideology to one side, we see it is a fact that privately managed prison providers achieve the majority of their targets, and their performance is closely monitored by the robust contract management processes that HMPPS has in place. Privately managed prisons have also pioneered the use of modern technology to improve the running of establishments and help to promote rehabilitation, including through the development of in-cell telephony to help prisoners to maintain ties with their families; opportunities for interactive story-time activities between prisoners and their children; and the introduction of electronic kiosks, which allow prisoners to have greater control over managing their day-to-day lives.

The public sector is now only catching up, and we are now investing in 50 prisons so that they can have in-cell phones, but private prisons got there first. Instead of ideological arguments about who provides the service, we should focus on what works to reduce reoffending and keep the public safe.

Wera Hobhouse: If we are talking about ideology, or lack of it, does the Secretary of State not accept that it would have been wise for the Government to pilot the privatisation that was considered before it was introduced in the probation service?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady brings me to probation, to which I wish to turn—

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) rose—

Mr Gauke: But before I do, I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Alex Chalk: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Of course, the picture is complex, because there are good and failing prisons in the private sector and in the public sector. One thing that has struck me is the variation in the calibre of leadership. There are some excellent prison governors and some who are less successful. What can be done to ensure that the requisite high level is seen across the prison estate?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Sometimes, Opposition day debates can be a bit of knockabout, but there is a lot that we ought to debate and discuss in respect of the prison system and how it operates, and leadership is a really important aspect. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) and congratulate him on his promotion. He pursued with great vigour the theme of the importance of leadership—of having the right governors and leadership teams in prisons—and it is absolutely key. To be honest, that matters more than whether an institution is run by a private company or by the public sector. The quality of the leadership is a much more important factor. I hope we have an opportunity to debate that issue and others like it in future.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): That is what has struck me during this debate: what matters in prisons are the standards under which people are kept and the results that are shown in stopping people reoffending, not who keeps the prisoners. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Mr Gauke: That is exactly right. If the private sector is not working, I am prepared to step in—I have no problem with doing that—but the most important thing is that we should look at the outputs and outcomes and base what we do on that, rather than take a simplistic view that the public sector is good and the private sector is bad or, indeed, vice versa. That is the approach that I wish to take.

Sandy Martin rose—

Rachael Maskell rose—

Mr Gauke: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), then to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

Sandy Martin: The right hon. Gentleman said earlier that we need to compare like with like; will he give us an example of a brand-new prison in the public sector that can be compared with a brand-new prison in the private sector?

Mr Gauke: The most recent brand-new prison that we did was Berwyn, and it is in the public sector. The next two prisons will be in the private sector because we want to keep a mixed market and to have a range. HMP Berwyn is a public sector prison. That decision was made by the coalition Government. We are pragmatic on that point.

I shall now give way again. I hope the hon. Member for York Central will forgive me for giving way to the hon. Member for Ipswich first; Ipswich is my home town.

Rachael Maskell: Quality is to follow.

On outcomes, which are the most important thing that we look at, will the Secretary of State explain why Askham Grange prison, which has the best outcomes in the country and the lowest reoffending rates and which is, I must say, in the public sector, is constantly under threat of closure? If we are looking at the evidence, surely the Government should keep the prison open.

Mr Gauke: When it comes to any decisions about prison closures, we will of course look at the evidence. We are not proposing any prison closures at this point, but we will always look at the evidence. Several factors
[Mr Gauke]

will determine whether or not a prison closes, but its record on rehabilitation is clearly something that we would very much take into account.

Let me turn to probation. In particular, we have heard much about the transforming rehabilitation reforms that were introduced in 2014. When we consider the reforms, it is important that we recognise that the private and voluntary sectors have brought to the probation service, even if we accept that there have been challenges—and I accept that there are challenges. We need to acknowledge that with the transforming rehabilitation reforms came the supervision of 40,000 additional offenders being released from short prison sentences. Those were offenders who previously received little or no supervision or support on release, so it is a positive change for public safety. The shadow Secretary of State forgot to mention that reoffending rates for those offenders in 2011. Of course, we want reoffending to be reduced.

Liz Saville Roberts: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his announcement earlier this year that he was bringing all probation services in Wales back into public management following the failure of the Working Links CRC. Will he commit to ensuring that that welcome and common-sense decision is resourced to succeed? Will he consider it as a possible template for bringing probation services in England back into public control, too?

Mr Gauke: First, I am of course determined to ensure that that decision succeeds. In July last year, I set out that Wales was going to go down the unified-model route, and we are accelerating that as a consequence of the failure of Working Links.

Before I turn to the wider points, let me put this debate in context. When we debate CRCs, we sometimes forget some of the good examples of innovative and dedicated work with offenders that CRCs are doing. Hampshire and Isle of Wight CRC was praised last week by the chief inspector of probation for offering a comprehensive range of high-quality rehabilitation programmes and unpaid work placements; London CRC is working closely with the Mayor of London on the safer streets partnership to tackle gangs and knife crime; and Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC is pioneering the first streets partnership to tackle gangs and knife crime; and working closely with the Mayor of London on the safer streets partnership, for which several of our CRC parent organisations can draw on experience in the employability sector. Dame Glenys Stacey has acknowledged that high-quality delivery is widespread. In fact, three quarters of the providers assessed have been rated as good. I was particularly encouraged to hear about the involvement of London CRC in the Grenfell disaster recovery operation: it arranged unpaid work placements with offenders who were helping local residents affected by the disaster. That is exactly the sort of delivery that we want to see: providers able to move quickly, respond to local needs and provide meaningful rehabilitation activity for offenders and for local communities.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): In Wrexham, my constituent Nicholas Churton was murdered by someone who was subject to the supervision of a community rehabilitation trust that, on the basis of what the Secretary of State’s own Department says, was not performing adequately. That is a practical result of an experiment with no additional investment; it led to human tragedy. I know the Secretary of State is a reasonable man, and he needs to look again at this situation.

Mr Gauke: Obviously, that is a tragic case, and, as I have before, I express my sympathies for the family of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. As regards identifying and attributing blame, I am not in a position to comment on that. CRCs manage those who are assessed as low and medium-risk offenders.

If I can return to my comments, I want to make a wider point about the crucial role that can be played by the private sector and, indeed, the voluntary sector in supporting probation work. It is the dedication and commitment of these organisations, many of them small and community-led, that enables offenders to turn their lives around. The work of the voluntary sector, particularly with vulnerable offenders such as those with learning difficulties and other complex needs, is irreplaceable and the Government are committed to supporting it. We have been clear that the public, private and voluntary sectors all have a clear role to play in building a strong probation service. That does not mean that we cannot learn from the experience of transforming rehabilitation.

I have been clear that under CRCs the quality of offender management has too often been disappointing. I am determined to learn from what has gone well and what has not under the current system. That is why the Government have acted decisively to end CRC contracts early, invest an additional £22 million a year in through-the-gate provision, and hold a consultation on the shape of future arrangements. I am grateful to all those who have responded to the public consultation, as well as for the work of Dame Glenys Stacey, the Justice Committee and the Public Accounts Committee in providing helpful scrutiny and challenge as we consider how best to deliver a stronger, more resilient system. It is important to recognise, as those partners have, the role of external factors in creating a challenging operating environment for CRCs, but we have also looked very carefully at their findings about the complexities of contractualising offender management and the challenges of ensuring continuity of supervision and integration among providers.

I look forward to bringing detailed plans for the future of probation to the House in due course. I will be driven by the evidence and what works. This must not be a matter of ideology or dogmatism but one of single-minded focus on delivering the probation system we need.

Victoria Prentis: When?

Mr Gauke: I think the phrase I just used was “in due course”.

Victoria Prentis: Is it?

Mr Gauke: It certainly is “in due course”.

Finally, as we debate these issues we should recognise that the challenges in the current system are not down to the work of probation staff. Their hard work and professionalism, in both the NPS and CRCs, is tremendous
Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As colleagues can see, we have a good number of contributors to this debate. I do not want to impose a time limit, but I would encourage colleagues to speak for about eight minutes each. In that way, we will be able to get everybody in comfortably.

1.56 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Listening to the Justice Secretary is always a pleasure. He was calm and reflective and is committed to trying to improve services, but he knows that that calmness and reflectiveness hide the shambles of the past six and a half years since his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, said in 2011, defending the Labour Government’s use of private sector prisons, “our policy was and is based on what works, rather than dogma.” —[Official Report, 31 March 2011, Vol. 526, c. 527.]

That is as it should be. On this side of the House, we will always work to put the public first in reducing reoffending, protecting the public and building a stronger justice system.

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service that took pride in its staff, with high morale. It delivered an effective service, but within the space of six years, the Government have put people at risk, split the service and reduced competence. We have not had an effective service, which has been shaken up, and it is now having to rebuild.

How does it do that? There is a model in Wales, where the probation service has been brought back together as a public service. I would like to see a justification not for why that has been done but for why it has not been done elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The Government are undertaking a consultation—again, in a calm, collected, professional way, the Minister is batting that ball and taking those hits—and the outcome should be clear: the probation service performed better when it was a unified body, working with serious and lower-risk offenders, and when it had good rehabilitation services, including community payback services, under its wing. Yes, it can contract out some of those services to the private sector—a drug charity might provide a good drug rehabilitation service; a local workplace scheme might best be provided by a local charity or a voluntary organisation. When I took the Offender Management Bill through the House of Commons in 2007, that was the private and voluntary sector involvement that we sought. It was not about splitting the service.

I simply say to the Minister, because I am coming to the end of my eight minutes, that I want to know who is accountable for this mess. If the Secretary of State stands up and says, “My predecessors”, that will help. I want to know what has been the consistent impact of this mess. There is a whole range of things that he and I know have gone wrong, and there are services that he and I know are not performing. It is his job to come clean and say those things in a professional way.

What happens next? I do not have time to talk about prisons, but I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) in the belief that we need to see a justification not for why and no longer, but for why it has not been done elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The Government are undertaking a consultation—again, in a calm, collected, professional way, the Minister is batting that ball and taking those hits—and the outcome should be clear: the probation service performed better when it was a unified body, working with serious and lower-risk offenders, and when it had good rehabilitation services, including community payback services, under its wing. Yes, it can contract out some of those services to the private sector—a drug charity might provide a good drug rehabilitation service; a local workplace scheme might best be provided by a local charity or a voluntary organisation. When I took the Offender Management Bill through the House of Commons in 2007, that was the private and voluntary sector involvement that we sought. It was not about splitting the service.

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What happens next? I do not have time to talk about prisons, but I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) in the belief that we should bring the probation service back into the public sector to meet the needs of our constituents, reduce crime, and turn offenders’ lives around. I welcome the new Prisons Minister, who will respond to the debate.

He should stand up and say, “I have looked at this. I have been in office for two or three days. I have come to the conclusion that my predecessors left an unholy mess, and I commit to bringing the service back into the public sector.”

2.3 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), my very well respected colleague on the Justice Committee. I am always immensely grateful for the contribution that he and other Members make to the work of our Committee. There might be the odd difference in nuance and tone, but there is broad agreement between us in the factual conclusions of our Select Committee reports. They are cross-party reports, and they are based on evidence, so I am with him on many of the points that he made.

In fairness, it is right to say that the Secretary of State has struck exactly the right tone. I congratulate him on doing so. It is not the first time in recent weeks that he has made an important speech on prisons policy and on other matters. The tone he struck in looking at the evidence has all too often been missing from the debate on prisons and on justice policy more generally on both sides of the political divide. I therefore welcome his tone and approach, and I broadly agree with where he is coming from.

There is not, to my mind, a need for a rigid, ideological division. There are differences on the evidence on prisons and probation. I think that the evidence of a mixed prisons economy makes it clear that good work is done in a number of private sector prisons. There are failures in those prisons, as there are failures in public sector prisons—the evidence provided by the chief inspector demonstrates that clearly. The issue is not who manages prison contracts—perhaps with the exception of facilities management failures, a specific area—but what we expect prisons and their staff to do on behalf of society and to achieve with the people sent there by the courts on behalf of the state. It is what we do to help them to ensure that prisoners are kept safely and decently, protecting the public, deterring reoffending and turning around the lives of those who go to prison so that they are less likely to reoffend and there are fewer victims of crime as a result.

Under Governments of all parties, we have not managed to achieve that satisfactorily for the past few decades—it is not a short-term thing—and investment is needed in some cases. I welcome the additional prison officers, but greater thought is needed, not just in the House but by society as a whole, about what we expect prison and the justice system to do. Ultimately, we can never make prison places of rehabilitation and reform unless they are safe—when my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) was Prisons Minister he got that absolutely right—but, realistically, we cannot do that unless we continue to put in the number of people that we currently do. To achieve that in a safe fashion that has public confidence, it is critical that we spend much more time and energy in our debate finding robust and viable alternatives that punish people in the community, rather than simply warehousing them in prison institutions, which is counterproductive for everyone. I very much welcome the Government’s willingness to look again at the presumption against shorter sentences, as has happened elsewhere.

There are important things in the prisons debate, but I, too, am not going to dwell on them as much as other matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is going to speak about prisons in particular, but I want to return, as the right hon. Member for Delyn did, to transforming rehabilitation and the probation system.

This morning, the Justice Committee heard from Dame Glenys Stacey, the chief inspector of probation, for the last time, as she is coming the end of her three-year tenure. She has done an excellent job. She has been robust and frank, and she has spoken truth to power, as an inspector should. She has not pulled her punches when necessary. The evidence that she has found is entirely consistent with evidence that the Select Committee found in a number of its reports, particularly one that we have recently published. It is entirely consistent, too, with the findings of the National Audit Office and those of the Public Accounts Committee. When, separately, four bodies produce reports based on essentially the same evidence and come to the same conclusions, the Secretary of the State and the Prisons Minister—I warmly
welcome him to his post—who have been brought up professionally to work on evidence, know that it is time for change.

I submit urgently to the Secretary of State that, whatever the good intentions behind the transforming rehabilitation programme, partly because of the pace at which it was undertaken, and partly because of the intrinsic nature of the probation service as a social service, which is different from the Prison Service in many ways, it has failed to achieve many of the laudable objectives set for it. It has not created greater diversity of provision and, above all, it has not succeeded in bringing the voluntary sector into probation work in the way that had been hoped. Most importantly, it has—like it or lump it—lost the confidence of many sentencers. If we are to achieve the objective I mentioned of developing robust alternatives to custody so that we do not overcrowd our prisons, it is critical that we have a system of supervision in the community, either as an alternative to custody or on release from custody, that commands the confidence of the sentencer—the judge and the magistrate—as well as of the public. It is very clear that that has not been achieved under the current arrangements.

The point about risk is an important one, as our report stressed. On all the evidence that we heard, the division of risk at the point of sentence and on the basis of the offence is, in reality, arbitrary. It is a snapshot in time that is then frozen for the rest of the offender’s supervision, whereas in reality the evidence is clear that risk will change. If the supervision goes well, it will decrease, but in certain circumstances it may increase. This is not an efficient division of risk to have. It is interesting that a different approach has been taken in Wales. One of the reasons that is worth looking at is that it could enable us not to have that arbitrary division of risk. I hope that my right hon. and learned Friends will look at the practicality of how that works out, because this is a critical issue.

Another significant thing that Dame Glenys stressed to us is the way in which the contracts were written. The problem is that probation work—which is, of its nature, dealing with people with complex circumstances in quite often changing and difficult environments—cannot easily be distilled into a set of contractual requirements, which might be easier to do, in some circumstances, within a closed institution.

The current contractual systems model does not succeed in achieving either innovation or the sharing of good practice, because there is no reward for either of those things. The Secretary of State’s review and consultation now gives us an opportunity to look at that. He was right to terminate the CRC contracts early, because they were simply not delivering what had been sought and intended. It is clear, on the evidence, that just recreating them would not be the answer. It would be more sensible to look at alternatives that, on the evidence, address the systemic problems that we now know are there but were perhaps not foreseen at the time.

There are areas that need to be looked at in relation to people with particular vulnerabilities—for example, the particularly high number of young offenders with black and minority ethnic characteristics going through our probation system, and the particularly high number of young offenders, many of whom, of course, have themselves been victims of abuse or other types of offence in the past. There is the real problem that we have with through-the-gate services, where clearly not enough is being done to discharge people from prison into circumstances where they will not be tempted to fall back into reoffending. I hope, in particular, that when the Secretary of State looks at new models for dealing with probation services, he will look specifically at the need to secure accommodation for people on release. Indeed, securing accommodation for people who are being supervised in the community as an alternative is central to the probation process. All the evidence clearly says that the best means of keeping out of trouble are a home, a job, and a family or support system relationship.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend is making a fabulous speech. Will he comment specifically on the evidence we heard this morning showing that one in five prisoners have nowhere to sleep on the night they are released?

Robert Neill: That was very shocking evidence indeed. Frankly, it is an indictment of every one of us that we are releasing people under those circumstances. I have here a piece of evidence from, I think, a visit to a CRC premises in south-east London, not far from my constituency, that was trying to supervise people who were sleeping in church halls, or sleeping rough in a graveyard or on the night bus. It is an obscenity, frankly, if we are releasing people from prison, with the objective of trying to get them to turn their lives around, and they are trying to live under those conditions. It makes rehabilitation work impossible. Getting those things right is actually much more important than the argument about who owns, manages and runs the service; they are fundamental issues. I believe that the Secretary of State has the opportunity, the willingness and the determination to do that.

Both the Secretary of State and the new Minister of State, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), are used to working on the basis of the evidence. Both they and I are also proud to hail from the one nation tradition within our party. That tradition reminds us that Conservative Members have always had a long-standing belief in social reform, as Members of other parties do, too. No one party has a monopoly on that. Getting prison and our criminal justice system right is a great cause of social reform, and I believe that the Secretary of State and the Minister get that and understand it. Equally, though, if all the evidence points one way, then that is the decision that the tribunal comes to. If they put those two things together, we have an opportunity to make progress in the coming weeks—I hope—and months.

2.15 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill).

This Government’s ideologically driven changes to the probation service have had a catastrophic impact on the justice system in this country. The reports from experts in the industry are damning, the first-hand accounts of those who have experienced the services shocking, and the damage done to our communities by this failing service all too clear to see. The comments we have heard from Members join the growing chorus of condemnation, alongside groups such as the Public Accounts Committee, the Justice Committee and the National Association of Probation Officers, to name but a few.
Perhaps none, however, has been as disparaging as the report on the outsourcing of our probation services undertaken by the National Audit Office. It speaks of significant risks being introduced by a Ministry setting itself up to fail; underinvestment in services by community rehabilitation companies motivated by commercial outcomes over public safety; and, perhaps least surprisingly, given the ministerial architect of the changes, a decision inspired by ideology that has proven a staggering waste of money to the taxpayer—this time, to the tune of nearly half a billion pounds. It is therefore difficult to disagree with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), that it is “unacceptable that so many unnecessary risks were taken with taxpayers’ money.”

But for all the talk of decisions taken in Westminster, with the colossal budgets in tow, we must not forget the impact, back in the real world, that these changes have on our constituents, because, more than anything, it is utterly unacceptable that so many risks were taken with taxpayers’ safety. It is residents in our communities, like mine in Barnsley East, who suffer when vital services, such as our probation system, begin to fail. Perhaps nothing demonstrates that more than the case of my constituent Jacqueline Wileman. Last year, four men stole a HGV lorry and drove it around Barnsley, damaging cars, injuring pedestrians, nearly killing a man and eventually crashing into a house, but not before hitting and killing Jacqueline near her home in Brierley. All four men had existing criminal records, with nearly 100 convictions between them. They had several convictions for driving offences, and one had already been sentenced for causing death by dangerous driving. Two of the men had recently finished probation supervision, and the one who stole the lorry had no driving licence and was, staggeringly, on probation at the time. It can be argued that these men should not have been on the streets and able to commit these tragic crimes in the first place. The lenient sentences handed down to them following Jackie’s death have led to calls that more could have been done by the probation service in the case of Jackie Wileman and what lessons can be learned. For her brother, Johnny, the impact on public safety of the outsourced probation service overseen by this Government is clear enough: “If the probation services had done their job properly,” he told me, “my sister would still be alive.”

2.20 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and friends from across the House who broadly take the same view on the progress we need to make with the probation system. I am not going to focus on that. My views are carefully set out in the report of the Justice Committee and have been well rehearsed by my colleagues from the Committee on both sides of the House. However, I noted carefully what the Secretary of State had to say, and I am extremely hopeful that we will have an announcement or statement from him in the very near future. I hope the result will be one that we all applaud.

As ever, I would like to talk about prisons. It always shocks me how empty the Chamber is when we discuss prisons. If we are serious about helping the lowest strata of society, we surely have a fairly obvious place to look to find them. I for one was very grateful that the Opposition chose this subject for today’s debate.

I am fortunate to represent one of the biggest constituencies in the country. The number of my electors is broadly the same as the number of adult men in prison. The point I am making is that there are a lot of people in prison, a lot of families affected and, perhaps more importantly, a lot of future victims who are affected by our failure to treat people and by the breeding of future criminals in prisons as they are run at the moment. We must accept that about a fifth of prisoners are sex offenders and that nearly all of them will be released into our communities. Members know that I spend a lot of my time here arguing in favour of prison reform, but the most compelling reason for me to do that is that we must save future victims from crimes that will ruin their lives.

The Justice Committee has written not only a marvellous report about transforming rehabilitation, but a big report on the prison population—for me, it is our magnum opus—which I hope the new Minister, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), has read and digested and will return to many times during his tenure. I will whizz through the main recommendations of that report and then give him some jobs for the rest of the week.

Our report’s first recommendation is that: “The prison population has become increasingly challenging in nature, with prisoners often having complex health and social needs. Many have learning disabilities or mental health conditions”, and that the Ministry of Justice needs to “acknowledge the challenge it faces and demonstrate that it has a long-term strategy”. Secondly, the prison population is projected to grow, and the existing approach “limits the scope” for the Ministry thinking more laterally about planning for that growth. The report states that the “more challenging mix” of those sentenced to custody is likely to be partly attributable...
to the impact of wider social factors over which the Ministry has no control, but the Ministry and prison officers have to pick up the pieces.

The third recommendation is that “Trends in ethnicity and the social drivers of complex and challenging behaviour should be more explicitly identified”.

Fourthly:

“To close the large gap between the money allocated to prisons by the Treasury and the current costs of running and maintaining them, the Ministry of Justice has estimated that it would have to reduce the prison population by 20,000 places. By the Ministry’s own admission this is not achievable under existing strategies and funding arrangements.”

How will the Minister possibly close that gap?

We have got to take prison reform seriously. This is my fourth Prisons Minister. There have been six Secretaries of State for Justice since 2010. All of them—certainly the Prisons Ministers—have been one nation, compassionate Conservatives. I stalk their every movement, as this Minister will find out, and I count them among my closest friends in this place; I hope it is mutual. It is really important that the current Minister can stay in place for long enough to make substantive change.

Robert Neill: Unless he is in the Cabinet.

Victoria Prentis: Oh no, he is not going anywhere—this is a long-term sentence! I have the highest regard for the current Minister. He has done more than his fair share of heavy lifting in the impasse on Brexit. I offer him the following suggestions with affection, but they are urgent, and I wish him to do them immediately.

No. 1, we must accept that diversion from custody is the only answer for sentences shorter than 12 months. To do that, we need robust alternatives, not a “get out of jail free” card. Once we have those in place, we need to re-educate judges, who in my experience—as the Minister knows, I know at least one extremely well—are kind, well-motivated and have seen it all before. We need legislation to reduce the number of short sentences. We have to stop churn through the prison gates.

No. 2, we need a full review of categorisation. It strikes me that several Members here today are well placed to lead that review; I am not looking too hard at any Member on either side of the Chamber. We know from Lord Farmer’s review that being close to family reduces reoffending. Current categorisation is holding us back. We have new evidence about the age of maturity, particularly in boys, which needs to be fed into decisions on where we place people.

No. 3, the Minister needs to have on his desk—in my view, every morning, but possibly every week—figures on the regime, by which I mean hours outside cells and numbers of people in segregation, for every prison in the country. Only then can he truly evaluate what is going on. I would be grateful if he shared those figures with the Justice Committee. While he is at it, could he ask for monthly figures on imprisonment for public protection and share them with us? That would be really helpful.

No. 4, we need to end Friday releases immediately. There is no excuse for releasing people at the end of the week, when services are simply not available to help them.

No. 5, we need to evaluate why and when we make children and young people disclose their criminal records. We know that it ruins their lives. A diverse group of MPs are championing that, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) to the right hon. Members for Warley (John Spellar) and for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). The Home Office and the MOJ need to decide who is responsible for that policy and act as soon as possible. It is not right for any child’s life to be ruined by an early misdemeanour.

No. 6, for years we described—and I described in court—our sex offender training programmes as the gold standard. A substantial amount was spent on producing those programmes, but they have conclusively been proved to have failed. Can we evaluate the programmes we have put in their place? The number of sex offenders is growing.

No. 7, we need to block mobile phone reception in prisons now—why on earth not?

No. 8, we need to provide a £37,000 scanner for every prison to stop drugs getting in. Everybody from the Minister down needs to go through them. There was a major stabbing of a prison officer in Bullyingdon Prison in my constituency last week.

No. 9, prisons are places of radicalisation. We need to grasp that and not lock people of similar views together simply because it makes control easier. A categorisation review might give us evidence to help with that.

No. 10 is on race. We need to be honest. It is not right that a black woman is more than twice as likely to be arrested as a white woman. I am pleased that the all-party parliamentary group on women in the penal system will look into the arrest of women. More than half the inmates held in prisons for young people in England and Wales at the moment are from a black and minority ethnic background. That is an extraordinary figure and not one to be proud of, and real change is needed. In short, I fear there will come a point when the Minister wishes he was back with the withdrawal agreement Bill.

2.29 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis).

It is no secret that our prison system is in a state of turmoil, with an outdated Victorian-era system that sees countless prisons inspected and issued with reports that reveal dilapidated conditions, overcrowding, violence, self-harm, drug abuse, low staff confidence and poor support. A decent prison system should deliver meaningful rehabilitation and provide offenders with purposeful activity. It is clear that this is lacking across the board.

The urgent notification issued to HMP Birmingham last August by the chief inspector of prisons was damning in its assessment of a failed prison run by G4S. This was followed by the unprecedented decision taken by the MOJ to bring it back under public control, reinforcing the argument that the privatisation of our prisons has failed. Following an inspection in February 2017, the prison operator at Birmingham was given 70 recommendations and targets. By the time of the inspection that triggered the urgent notification 18 months later, only 14 of the 70 targets had been met. Safety was deemed by the inspector to have been a colossal failure. In a survey of prisoners, 71% responded that they had felt unsafe at some point in their stay at Birmingham.
I visited HMP Birmingham, along with other members of the Justice Committee, in October—shortly after it had been issued with the urgent notification and as the new governor was getting to grips with what he had inherited—and it was clear that the system had failed at multiple levels. As the chief inspector noted, we found the prison to be in a state of disrepair, conditions that were unfit to be lived in and staff morale at crippling levels. While these issues are by no means limited to privately run prisons alone, the case of HMP Birmingham has highlighted the dangers and costs faced because of the distinct lack of accountability in its operation.

As well as ensuring that rehabilitation is provided inside prison, it is vital that our justice system has the means by which to monitor and assist offenders throughout their transition back to society. Nowhere has the failed privatisation of our justice system been so apparent as in that of our probation services. The transforming rehabilitation reforms pushed through at the end of the coalition Government were preceded by stark warnings that splitting the workload between a publicly run national probation service and privately tendered community rehabilitation companies, with payment by results, would have damaging consequences for the management of offenders. The recent reports on transforming rehabilitation by both the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee are deeply critical and prove that these previous cautions were fully warranted.

Last year, I held a Westminster Hall debate on the role of privatised community rehabilitation companies. Data had consistently shown that CRCs had met an average of just eight of the 24 targets set under their contracts, with the worst-performing organisation meeting only four. These reforms have turned probation into a tick-box exercise, rather than something that should be holistic and tailored to individual and specific needs. Since my debate, rather than improve, the situation has stagnated and in some cases has got even worse. It is worth noting that HMIP found that the quality of probation work was noticeably better across the national probation service by comparison with the privatised CRCs.

The role of a probation officer is not just a job, but a vocation. Yet a Unison staff survey of its 3,500 CRC members has revealed that 25% of staff in CRCs have only occasionally had the equipment, resources or systems they needed to do their jobs properly, while 41% said they had never experienced a manageable case load, 25% said that their CRC never or only occasionally completed community orders within the required time, and 43% said they never felt valued by their CRC. This fragmented, broken system is having serious consequences for the delivery of meaningful results.

The Public Account Committee report notes that, in 2018 alone, CRCs failed to provide nearly 3,000 prisoners with through-the-gate services. Additionally, there are numerous examples of single phone calls being deemed sufficient when monitoring offenders in the months following release, because that, rather than face-to-face meetings, is the simplest way for understaffed CRCs to meet their targets. The Public Accounts Committee report goes on to conclude that the transforming rehabilitation reforms have failed to reduce reoffending by as much as expected, with the average number of reoffences committed by each reoffender actually increasing. The Justice Committee’s “Transforming Rehabilitation” report has also called for a review of the long-term future of delivering probation services, including how performance might be compared with an alternative system for delivering probation—namely, a community-based approach.

One method to address offending rates is to look at abolishing short sentences. This is something that my Justice Committee colleagues and I have been calling for for some time, and I welcome the MOJ’s latest efforts to move to a presumption against their use and towards more of a community sentencing model. However, for a community sentencing model to be effective and for it to get public trust and support, it must ensure that probation services are able to monitor and support offenders in their rehabilitation. On the enforcement of community orders, HM inspectorate of probation found that the publicly run national probation service was reaching levels of good-quality assessment 83% of the time, compared with just 37% among the privatised CRCs.

The privatised approach to rehabilitation has left a system in disarray, and it will ultimately end up costing the Government £467 million more than originally planned, following bail-outs and cancelled contracts. This money could have been put towards better prison conditions and improved community sentencing, or, better still, spent on a fully funded, publicly owned and accountable probation service.

In her final annual report, the current chief inspector of probation, Dame Glenys Stacey, concludes that the current model left by the transforming rehabilitation reforms has left us with a probation service that is “irredeemably flawed”. She goes further by saying that the profession as a whole has been diminished with an unhealthy reliance on unqualified staff, a service that has been changed by the impact of commerce and contracts that treat probation as a transactional business. She even says that terminating CRC contracts early and wishing to move to an improved tender process will not solve the issue. In short, her conclusions point to privatisation as the fundamental issue that is failing our justice system. Surely, it is now time to say that the privatisation of our justice system has failed. It is time to bring prisons and the probation service back under public control.

2.37 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). Devotees of Mortimer and the Rumpole series will well remember the Penge bungalow murders, so it is appropriate that she has spoken in this debate.

I stand to speak as neither a lawyer, a member of the Justice Committee nor indeed a former Minister, so I am tempted to say that I start with a distinct advantage. However, I particularly want to note the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). I thought she spoke with incredible care, attention and knowledge, and we were lucky to hear what she had to say.

May I join many across the House in welcoming my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland)? He is, I am tempted to say, one of my oldest and dearest friends in politics and personally. He is godfather to my youngest daughter and she is thrilled that he is now a Minister of State at the Ministry
of Justice. He is a fan and an impersonator of Mr Francis Sinatra. He will do this job his way, and he will do it magnificently.

Let me start by stating what I hope will not be controversial: our prison estate needs more money. Since 2010, I would suggest there has been too great a willingness by Ministers to accept overly zealous reductions in departmental funding in one of the most crucial areas of social and domestic policy. Those reductions have clearly affected the physical fabric of the estate, which means that the environment in which prisoners are held and in which our devoted prison staff work has gone down. It does need new funding, and I know that the ministerial team—coming, as others have referenced, from the centre ground-based, one nation Tory tradition—will make a very strong case for that to the Treasury. In making that case, I hope the Minister will underscore what I think is a feeling, certainly across the Conservative Benches, that new departmental money should not be found by milking the probate cash cow.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) spoke about ideology. I have some sympathy with him, but I was also confused by his argument. There is nothing mentioned, given the sensitivity and importance of the subject, than rightly to clobber, as I do, those who say, in some sort of Orwellian way, that only the private sector can do these things and we must chase out the public sector—“private good; public bad”—only then to weaken one’s case by adopting at the Dispatch Box exactly the same position in reverse. He seemed to suggest that there was neither merit nor benefit in involving either the third sector or the private sector. Given the magnitude of the task and the importance of getting it right, I suggest—I say this not as a lawyer—that we should be encouraging an attitude of, “All hands to the pump.” I very much agree that we need to ensure that there is a level playing field—for want of a better phrase—in the assessment and monitoring of private and public provision.

I am lucky to have HMP Guys Marsh in my constituency. James Lucas is its first-class governor, and I have met many of the staff there and know that they are devoted in their duty. However, like many others, the prison is infested with Spice and has problems with the misuse of mobile phones and the drugs culture generally. It appeared in the national newspapers only a few weeks ago, when the entrepreneurial spirit of the criminal classes was found to be in full tilt after prison staff discovered that dead rats stuffed with SIM cards and drugs had been thrown over the fence for prisoners to find. I raised the point in the House of Commons. The hon. Friend, is to identify bespoke policies to drive up recruitment in our rural prisons, where property prices are high and housing is often scarce. There are some incentives that could be deployed. Certainly, having talked with the governor at HMP Guys Marsh, I think the problem is not lack of appetite for recruitment, but lack of interest from people in the immediate locality. If we are to attract high-grade prison officers, we need to do something about that.

The third sector is absolutely crucial. I have had the pleasure of meeting Clean Sheet and Astara Training, whose managing director, Victoria Smith, is based in my constituency. I have also seen the excellent work of Eva Hamilton MBE, who runs Key4Life, which has a contract with HMP Guys Marsh. Their work is focused, bespoke and attentive to detail. Those are the sorts of charitable-focused, third-party social enterprises that my hon. and learned Friend and his ministerial team should really be focusing on, to foster their support, engagement and initiative. They work in education, apprenticeships, securing vocational qualifications and drug rehabilitation.

I will close my remarks with this cri de coeur. The aridity of an Orwellian approach of “Two legs good; four legs bad”, whether from the left or the right, will not benefit our country, our society or our communities, and it will certainly not benefit those who work in our prisons or those serving sentences. The state should always have this as a final test: if it is to hold the right to deprive a man or woman of their liberty, it should always consider what impact any decision it makes will have in order to ensure that that man or woman is a one-time visitor to prison. If the state keeps that in mind when making each decision, whether it is the third sector, the private sector or public sector, and with the instincts and experience of the Lord Chancellor and the new Prisons Minister, I have every hope that we can get this right.

2.46 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), and I echo his remarks about the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who has an incredibly impressive knowledge of this subject—I suggest that she is a little wasted on the Back Benches.

I want to focus my remarks on the impact of prison on prisoners and their families, and to consider whether prisons are fulfilling the role that we expect of them. I am increasingly receiving communications from constituents who are in prison, or visits from their family members
in my surgeries, who are deeply concerned about just how safe prisons are. I have met families with grave concerns about suicide risk, repeated incidents of self-harm, lack of attention to mental health conditions, and issues with education and family support.

Most recently I had a father and partner of a prisoner come to see me about a young man who is in prison. He has given himself the most appalling injuries, having forced into his arm a pen and two metal bars. That happened while he was in HMP Humber. His injuries were left untreated for so long that by the time he was moved to HMP Hull, which then took him to hospital for the rods to be removed, the hospital was completely unwilling to do that, because there was too great a risk in taking them out. He has been left in a physical condition that means he has repeated infections, fevers and risk of sepsis, because the prison failed to take action at the time.

There might be very little public sympathy for that young man, but society has accepted that prison is a remedy for criminal acts. We have also accepted that rehabilitation, as well as punishment and public safety, is the purpose of prison. While people are self-harming, they are in absolutely no position to be rehabilitated.

I have no doubt that prison officers struggle with monitoring appropriately all the individuals under their watch, due to staffing numbers, high turnover and high sickness levels. However, sadly, I have also had brought to my attention situations where, for whatever reason, officers are involved not in the safeguarding and management of prisoners, but either in ignoring their needs altogether, because they are quiet and compliant, or in assaults against inmates. Another constituent contacted me to tell me about the times he was assaulted by prison officers, who are in a position of authority and great trust. He claimed that he was seriously beaten on four separate occasions during the 14 months he was in HMP Humber. After he complained to the governor, he found that the CCTV of the incidents had gone missing. I have no way to prove whether that story is accurate, and I take with a pinch of salt some of the claims that are made, but how sure is the Secretary of State that we are making progress in this area?

I have no way to prove whether that story is accurate, and I take with a pinch of salt some of the claims that are made, but how sure is the Secretary of State that we are making progress in this area?

My office struggles to get any information out of prisons to fully and properly advise constituents and their families in a timely fashion, so what hope do those who are incarcerated have? It has the feeling of an impenetrable service and while we all might expect the walls of prisons to be suitably impenetrable, surely Members of Parliament should be able to get to the bottom of an issue and ascertain whether something has gone awry. How can CCTV footage simply have disappeared? It is a source of great frustration to this man, who was sentenced to three years and three months for joint enterprise in a robbery, that he has now been in prison for 11 years, because of indeterminate life-licence sentencing. He says that he cannot wait until the end of the year for another parole hearing, and will take his own life if this continues. I can imagine how he can get to that point—expecting to be in prison for three years but being there for 11. It seems that the primary reason for this—I have heard nothing to the contrary from the prison—is his mental health status, not his likelihood of reoffending.

The issue of indeterminate sentences is coming up more often. Of course I want to see the public protected, but I had another case in which mental health again has played a huge role in the prisoner’s circumstances. A 15-year-old boy was charged with an offence, then he was sectioned for a month. He was arrested after he came out of hospital and he sat on remand for a year. In 2013, he was sentenced to 220 days with a life licence. Six years later, he is still in custody. He has repeatedly self-harmed. I wrote to the previous Prisons Minister about this case, because of the ping-ponging between Rampton and Humbercare about who would take responsibility for his care. I could get nowhere with those organisations, and it took the Prisons Minister’s intervention to achieve a resolution. In all that time, his family have struggled to get any information out of the prison, and even to get access to their son. His withdrawal from any contact or communication led the prison to tell the family, “Well, he doesn’t want to see you.” The family has therefore had very little information, but now, thankfully, there has been some movement. It should not take intervention by Ministers for basic systems to be in place to reassure family members. When people are put in prison, they are not the only ones who suffer: their families do too, and they have done nothing wrong. Families often feel out of the loop and find it difficult to get any information. I do not know what it is like for colleagues, but my office has found it extremely difficult to get a good standard of response in a timely fashion from prisons.

My final point about probation is that at the weekend we saw many reports about how fly-tipping has increased enormously. Locally, dumping in alleyways is a huge issue for residents. Until August last year, our probation service had community payback activity that involved cleaning the alleys. That has now stopped because, apparently, it did not provide a feeling of worth for the individuals. It is private land and the council have no responsibilities over it, but tenants and landlords are not taking responsibility for it. That activity provided a useful public service, and I ask that it be reinstated as a rotational duty for community payback participants. While it may not seem to have any worth for them, it does for the wider community.
staff levels were dangerously low, violent assaults were increasing and staff were struggling to get to grips with high levels of drug taking. The prison is in the centre of the city so it is easy to throw drugs over the wall and into the prison. The then governor was also extremely concerned about the high levels of mental health problems that he saw in the prisoners. He told me that he saw prison as a microcosm of the problems we see in society. Where we see drug use and mental health issues growing in wider society, they are magnified within the walls of prisons.

There was some good news. The prison recruited many new staff, up to the full complement, but many of them were young and inexperienced, and I was concerned about staff safety. The previous Minister—and I thank him for his work—kindly visited the prison with me and saw at first hand the need for repairs, and we heard from the governor and staff about the lack of ongoing support and mentoring for trainees. That Minister promised action.

When I last visited the prison a few months ago, I was pleased that several actions had been taken. I heard about new mentoring for younger members of staff, and there was a much more positive attitude. Lots of work had been done to reduce the amount of drugs coming into the prison, through mobile phone detectors, netting and better work with the police, including the use of dogs to patrol the outside perimeter. That was helping. I also saw that the state of the prison had improved. The overcrowding had been reduced. The prison was physically lighter and cleaner, and a more purposeful place. Indeed, many of the prisoners had been involved in refurbishing their own areas of the prison, with better lighting, fresh paint and new flooring. The place felt safer in many areas.

The new prison governor told me he was passionate to break the revolving-door cycle and make sure that the people who come into prison have opportunities to learn skills. She started a strategy so that every prisoner, within three days of arriving in the prison, would do a course on food hygiene and safety, and be given a certificate with their new qualification. That also had the advantage that all prisoners could help to serve the food. It set them on a journey to learning, not just being locked up. She told me how she wanted more local companies, businesses and charities to be involved in the prison to help to bring skills, opportunities and training to the prisoners. She was also very pleased about the key worker scheme that was just starting to make sure that prisoners had someone they could confide in, who would talk them through their journey as they were about to leave prison, and make sure that they were helped in that situation.

The governor was also enormously concerned by the seven tragic deaths—every death is tragic—that had happened in the prison in the past couple of years, and the level of violence is still high. There have been improvements, but there is still a way to go.

I do not care who runs our prisons, whether it is the public or private sector, but I want to make sure that our prisons are well run. I am delighted that we have an excellent new Prisons Minister and I ask him to come to Chelmsford prison—we are only an hour away—and see what more we can do. The previous Prisons Minister promised and delivered changes, but we need more and I hope we can work together to deliver them.
The Government’s refusal to publish the HMPPS estate and transformation team’s report into whether the public sector should be allowed to operate new build prisons has led to deep suspicion. If the Government admit that the public sector is the benchmark, why is it shut out of the bidding process? Marketisation has utterly failed in the prison and probation service and public safety has been compromised. It is time for the Government to listen to frontline workers who know exactly how to turn things around. The Government must end the two-tier workforce for pay, conditions and professional standards in the probation and prison service.

3.4 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The privatisation of the probation service must be one of the worst decisions ever taken by Government. The hard work of committed probation staff has been totally undermined by the Government’s transforming rehabilitation reforms, which in 2014-15 broke up the probation service and part-privatised it. Driven solely by political dogma, this failed, dangerous experiment has wasted £467 million of taxpayers’ money. It has failed to reduce reoffending and led to a huge increase in people on short-term sentences being recalled to prison. Reoffending rates for serious offences such as murder, rape and manslaughter are soaring, and our public are now less safe because of the Tories’ profit motive.

The privatisation of the probation service has been roundly condemned. The chief inspector of the probation service, Dame Glenys Stacey, the National Audit Office and the Justice Committee have been critical. The state of the part-privatised probation service is, to quote Dame Glenys Stacey, “irredeemably flawed”. It should be abandoned, with the service taken back in-house.

The privatisation was rushed through by the then Secretary of State, splitting the probation service into two. High-risk offenders were to be dealt with by the national probation service, with the rest dealt with by privatised community rehabilitation centres. Public money is now sucked into private profits, causing damage to the service, staff, users and local communities. The number of probation professionals has dropped to a critical level, forcing them to cut corners, and the profession of probation has been downgraded.

Napo has warned that the reforms have created a two-tier workforce between the CRCs and the NPS for pay and conditions and professional standards, with an average pay gap of 4.5% in favour of NPS staff and worse terms and conditions for CRC staff. Service users need a relationship of trust with the probation service to reduce reoffending. However, the current state of the probation service forces offenders to share personal information about their lives with strangers each time they see a probation officer, hindering their willingness to engage.

Staff are committed to delivering vital work in probation, but working conditions are putting undue pressure on the workforce. The underfunding of CRC contracts has led to a scaling back and to cuts in specialist support for offenders leaving prison, which, as we heard this morning from Dame Glenys Stacey in her report to the Justice Committee, has resulted in more than a fifth of offenders released from prison being released with no fixed abode and many suffering from substance abuse, both of which are high-risk factors that lead to reoffending.

As the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) mentioned, many services provided by the voluntary sector have been cut as a result of the CRC contracts. We have seen a loss in services provided for substance abuse and for housing resettlement for prisoners, following the awarding of CRC contracts, which many CRCs have claimed were badly drafted, although it should be pointed out that their successful bids were based on the MOJ’s specifications.

The CRC contracts were granted to monolithic private sector providers that, like the Titanic, were too big to fail, yet this year we have seen two of the providers—Working Links and Interserve—announce that they have called in the administrators due to financial problems. Having thrown good money after bad, the Government need to stop this charade that the CRC model is anything other than bust. The National Audit Office has said so, the Justice Committee has said so and the chief inspector has said so. When will the Government get the message?

Labour has opposed the privatisation of our probation service from the outset. This once award-winning service, now in the hands of private companies, is crying out to be brought back in-house and devolved to new local probation services with proper local, democratic control and accountability. Both Napo and Unison, representing thousands of members in the probation service, endorse this model of public ownership and local control.

The privatisation of our prisons gives us further evidence of the failings caused by running public services for profit. In October 2018, I visited HMP Birmingham following the serving of an urgent notification by Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons after the major disturbances at the prison in 2016, which resulted in severe damage and four wings being taken out of use. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons carried out an unannounced inspection of the prison in August 2018. The inspectorate found that the prison had been so badly run that it initiated an urgent notification protocol, saying there had been a “near total failure to address…previous recommendations” and “an abject failure of contract management and delivery”.

The next day, the Secretary of State for Justice issued a contract notice removing the prison from G4S’s control and placing it under the leadership of a governor from Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. This was a shocking outcome for G4S, and few will have had confidence in its ability to run prisons, but, lo and behold, the Government have allowed it to bid for the right to run more prisons.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said, a Labour Government would take the running of prisons back into the public sector. Time after time we have seen the failures of privatisation in the prison and probation service, only for the Government to reward failure by ploughing more public money into the pockets of private contractors. It does not work and will not work in the future. It all needs to be brought back in-house. If the Secretary of State does not heed the warnings, he risks wasting more public money, making the public, staff and prisoners less safe and rewarding failure. This has to stop. We need to bring it back in-house.
3.10 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am always pleased when there is a consensus. I listened carefully to the contributions of Government Members, who claim to be promoters of social reform, but the proposals for social reform introduced under the coalition Government far too often were done also to save money. Social reform cannot be done on a shoestring. That is where these things always go wrong. If Government Members are serious about social reform, everyone across the House needs to think about what those reforms are worth. We should not only value social reform but put the money behind it.

I welcome the new Prisons Minister to his role. His predecessor promised to resign in August if he did not achieve a substantial reduction in prison violence by then. I wonder whether the new Minister will stick to that pledge or whether he will be reshuffled before.

The Government have collapsed into paralysis. The House should be full on Tuesday afternoons, but it is not. I wonder whether the Government are able to act any more, particularly on the crisis in prisons, the state of probation services being one example of that crisis. I hope that the promises made will result in some improvement soon.

The partial privatisation of our probation services has been another instance of the Government’s determination to implement a rushed and badly researched policy. The new system was introduced without research or piloting. I asked the Secretary of State about piloting but he did not really answer my question. I hope that if changes are introduced they will first be piloted, before we throw a lot of Government money at them.

Rehabilitation should be a holistic project in which an offender and his community feel secure and able to rebuild. This type of work cannot be done on a shoestring and focused on the bottom line.

This is a public project asking what type of society we are trying to create. The Liberal Democrats believe in a society that puts rehabilitation and communities first. Today’s reality could not be further from that. Last month’s Justice Committee report confirms what the Liberal Democrats have been saying for months: our prisons are not fit for purpose. The prison population has exploded, leaving the services unable to cope with the demand. Some 60% of prisons are over capacity and some now hold 50% more inmates than they were intended for.

This pressure on space has a human cost. Recent statistics on deaths, assaults and self-harm in prisons are shockingly high and increasing. Last year 325 people died in prison, including 92 from suicide, and there were more than 50,000 recorded incidents of self-harm. Government policies mean that this crisis will become more extreme, with the prison population projected to rise by 3,000 over the next three years, unless we do something about it.

What are the long-term consequences for everyone else? We are failing to rehabilitate, with record numbers of ex-prisoners going on to reoffend, and this is putting more strain on a system already stretched to breaking point. Short sentences are one of the many factors in this escalating problem, yet we already know that short sentences simply do not work. Evidence released by this Government proves that community sentences are far more likely to stop someone reoffending. Short sentences target the most vulnerable offenders, especially women: 72% of all women offenders are sentenced for less than a year and 61% of women given short sentences go on to reoffend. Often these months in prison are just long enough for a woman to lose her job, house and children. They find themselves released back into society with no safety net and very little support.

Private probation companies are simply not up to the job, given the state of today’s prisons and the severe lack of integration between these services. Today we have heard story after story of these companies being unable to offer the support they are required to give. Some of these failures are worse than others. Reports from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation last September found that private probation companies were failing to protect survivors of abuse once the abuser had been returned to the community. The report stated:

“Too often we were left wondering how safe victims and children were, especially when practitioners failed to act on new information indicating that they could be in danger.”

Further investigations discovered that only 27% of eligible offenders had been referred to an accredited programme designed to prevent further abuse.

Private probation companies, allowed under the new system to manage low to medium-risk cases, are overstretched. Last September’s report stated that private probation companies viewed home visits as a “luxury”. Domestic factors, such as escalating abuse or unstable living situations, are often determining factors in whether someone goes on to reoffend. It is simply not acceptable that probation companies are not able to act because of the costs involved.

The prisons system and by extension probation services are not considered by most people, who hope they will never encounter them personally, but the way we treat the men and women unfortunate enough to end up in prison matters, not just to the individuals but to our wider communities. Rehabilitation, when done properly, spans both the prisons system and probation. This work must be integrated to be successful. Rehabilitation is not just some soft-hearted liberal project; ultimately, it is about the security of our communities. I call on the Government to reinvest in rehabilitation by reforming standards, increasing resources and improving services to build a safer and more cohesive society, and yes social reform must cost the money that it is worth to us.

3.17 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who made important points about the need for social reform and how it does indeed cost money.

I want to speak in particular about the value of women’s centres as a community response to women offenders. I start by paying tribute of course to my friend and colleague the inspirational Baroness Corston, whose groundbreaking report led to the establishment of a wider network of women’s centres across the UK. I have visited one such centre—Eden House, in my neighbouring constituency of Bristol East, Baroness Corston’s former constituency—a few times in the past few years, the first time in my former professional role at Respect, the national organisation for domestic violence perpetrator work, in order to discuss specific interventions for women with complex histories of domestic violence and offending.
Women experience the majority of domestic violence. While there are of course male victims, their abusers are disproportionately male partners, although there are female perpetrators. There is no excuse for the abuse of a partner, female or male, but in my previous work I learned a lot about the differences between the profiles of female and male domestic perpetrators, particularly those with a complex picture of experience as a victim and a perpetrator.

Some women are indeed very violent and controlling and do fit the profile of coercive and controlling abusers, but the majority of those who use violence tend to do so either in self-defence or resistance in the context of a partner who is controlling and on whom they may be dependent. Some of the women I met at Eden House had this complex history. Often it started young—sometimes they had experience of child abuse—and their offending was intricately linked to their experience of abuse as well as to mental health and substance misuse. Those are examples of the specific needs and experiences of women offenders that Baroness Corston identified and of the reasons she concluded that specific women-centred responses were needed.

Baroness Corston also identified three specific groups of characteristics. First, the domestic category covers abusive relationships, but also childcare. Single mothers with sole responsibility for children are much less likely than male offenders to have someone on the outside to look after their home and the children, and are therefore more likely to lose both. Secondly, there is the personal category. Many women offenders have severe mental illness or substance misuse problems, which are likely to get worse if they are remanded in prison. They may also be self-harming, or have eating disorders. The third category is the socio-economic. Women are paid less than men, and are more likely to experience relationship breakdown as economically damaging. They are more likely than men to face under-employment or discrimination because of their parenting responsibilities.

A fourth category relates to the offending itself. Most, although not all, women offenders are convicted of non-violent offences, and present little public risk. They actually present a greater risk to themselves than to others. However, because there are fewer of them, they are more likely to be sent further away when they are sentenced. For other reasons, proportionate to their numbers, they are more likely to be remanded in custody than men. Because of their domestic responsibilities, they may therefore experience further, compounding consequences, such as fewer visits from children and other family members, leading to a further likelihood that their children will be taken into care permanently. Shorter sentences are also less likely to deflect future offending.

For all those complicated reasons, prison makes the lives of women and their children much worse than it makes those of male offenders, although I am not suggesting that there are no complications for male offenders. It is also much less likely that their reoffending rates will be reduced by a prison sentence.

Baroness Corston pointed out that because of those differences, there should be distinct, separate and different approaches. She recommended that community sanctions for non-violent women offenders should be the norm, that responses should take into account women’s vulnerabilities and their domestic and childcare responsibilities, and that the Together Women programme should be extended and a network of women’s centres set up as soon as possible. As I am sure you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Together Women programme was set up by the Labour Government with £9.1 million in 2005 to develop and test holistic responses to women.

As a result of Baroness Corston’s recommendation, a further £15.6 million was allocated for 2009 to 2011 for the number of women’s centres to be increased to, eventually, 46. At their best, they provide a combination of one-to-one holistic support, help with substance misuse, counselling, therapy, domestic abuse programmes, life skills classes and workshops, referral to other help and, sometimes, on-site childcare and residential facilities. A Ministry of Justice evaluation has found statistically significant differences in favour of women’s centres compared to custodial sentences in respect of the risk of reoffending.

Kate Green: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Thangam Debbonaire: I am short of time, but I will give way.

Kate Green: I just wanted to make a point about cost-effectiveness. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the underfunding of women’s centres relative to other disposals? According to those who run my local centre in Greater Manchester, none of them have been able to access the tampon tax funding. Surely that would have been ideal for them.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that excellent point. In 2011, a report on the social return on investment produced by the Women’s Resource Centre and the New Economics Foundation stated that every £1 invested in women’s organisations generated between £5 and £11 in social value. My hon. Friend has made the important point that there is often a long-term saving to be made, and that those organisations need investment. Other evaluations have documented substantial improvements in mental health and other dimensions such as relationships, work, housing, health and money, all of which, combined with the reduced risk of reoffending, make women’s centres a good investment.

Where are we now? The Women in Prison report “The Corston Report 10 Years On” found that many pioneering women’s centres either do not exist or can no longer provide the full range of services, and that their model does not fit the “payment by results” model which has been introduced into the privatisation of probation. The Government’s female offender strategy acknowledges the legacy of the Corston report and the need for the value of women-specific services, but we just do not have the national network that we should have.

I am told that the Treasury will receive £80 million from the sale of HMP Holloway, which would transform women’s centres. The Howard League for Penal Reform has reminded me that, following its inquiry last year, the all-party parliamentary group for women in the penal system said that there was a real risk that many women’s centres were now so watered down that they could no
longer be as effective as they should or could be. I ask the Minister to talk to his colleagues in the Treasury about keeping the £80 million and investing it to ensure that there is a fully funded network with a full range of women’s services across the country, because that range really saves lives. It saves women from the risk of reoffending, it saves children from the risk of being taken into care, and it helps to turn lives around. That was true in 2007, when Baroness Corston wrote the report, it was true in the “10 Years On” report, and it is true now.

3.25 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. The Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). The excellent speeches that have been made by Members on both sides of the House have shown how important justice is. It is, I believe, the cornerstone of democracy, and it needs to be respected and resourced as such. The current Transport Secretary clearly did not share that view when, as Justice Secretary, he accepted a 40% cut in the Justice budget at the start of the austerity regime.

Prisons have been reduced to places that brutalise offenders, and have become more like universities of crime. Her Majesty’s inspectorate has reported some of the most disturbing prison conditions that we have ever seen, conditions that have no place in an advanced nation in the 21st century. Prisoners are living in squalor. The inspectorate described conditions in the UK—one of the largest economies in the world—as squalid.

I recognise the improvements that were begun by the previous Prisons Minister in the 10-prison project, but we as a Parliament and the Government need to take a long and concerted look at how those improvements can be replicated in the many prisons that have not benefited from the same focus. We also need to take a long and concerted look at whether privatisation of the prison system is really the appropriate approach. Will the private sector ever share best practice with its competitors, which may well be competing for one of the services that their opponents are providing? I do not think so.

Sadly, the Government’s policies are not limited to the prisons themselves, but extend to the probation service. Irreparable damage is being caused to that system by the breaking up and part-privatisation of the UK’s award-winning probation service, which is served by proud, professional probation officers who are committed to working to help to reintroduce people to society. Their careers have been smashed. The way in which professionals have been treated in our justice system is so unfair.

Owing to the actions of the previous Justice Secretary, one in five people who are released from prison have no fixed abode. The community rehabilitation company, the private sector provider, is issuing tents to people who are released from prison. Some are currently sleeping on 24-hour bus services, and some are even being directed to church graveyards. How can anyone look at the current prison and probation service and see anything other than crisis and failure?

We have new people in; the last Prisons Minister was a good one and I am told we have a good one now and a good Secretary of State. I call on them to be brave: I call on the Government to respect justice as a cornerstone of democracy and to fund it as such. The whole of society benefits from a good justice system, yet at present it is being taken to its knees. I call on the current team to be brave and shout out for more resources and respect justice for what it is: a cornerstone of democracy.

3.29 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Throughout this debate we have heard strong speeches on the dangerous consequences of privatisation in our justice system, with Members warning against heading further down this path. These contributions were made by those on both the Government and Opposition Benches. The point made earlier around the Tory ex-Secretary of State Sir Malcolm Rifkind’s quote is pertinent and should be used again: he said that deprivation of liberty “should not be the responsibility of a private company”.

And we can be left in no doubt that the needless privatisation of our probation system and the heavy involvement of the private sector in prisons have proved to be nothing less than a catastrophic disaster.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend, the shadow Secretary of State and I all share the same probation trust; it is run by Purple Futures, part of Interserve, which has gone into administration. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that this is a developing pattern, and that the former Secretary of State who transformed rehabilitation did not think it through, and we now need to remodel it and bring it back into the public sector?

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree and will come on to that point shortly. I would have liked to say a lot more but have been given firm instructions by the Deputy Speaker that I must stick to a strict time limit, so have had to cut a lot of my contribution.

Much of the focus of today’s debate has been on the privatisation of probation, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who made important contributions which I will come on to later. The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), spoke about the impact on probation and made the point that there have been numerous reports, all of which highlight the failure in probation.

We have seen offenders released into the hands of private companies whose concern is not the public and their safety, but shareholders and profits. It is right that this has been a key focus, for the Government have not transformed rehabilitation but have destroyed it—crushing rehabilitation, not transforming it.

The failure of private provision companies on reoffending is singled out for particular criticism, as while the principal aim of the plans was to reduce reoffending, the MOJ’s own proven reoffending statistics instead show a rise in reoffending. The blame for this lies squarely with the privatisation of probation and the horrendously delivered through-the-gate services, which are so ineffective that prison and probation inspectors found there would be no impact at all if they were removed. It is easy to see why they reached this conclusion, as private probation companies have consistently failed to deliver effective support for offenders around accommodation, welfare and employment, all of which are factors determining the likelihood of reoffending.
But it gets worse, as inspections of private probation companies routinely found that they were not just delivering a poor level of supervision of offenders but were carrying it out in non-confidential open public spaces such as libraries, and shockingly in some cases through texts, rather than in private locations. So poor is the record of the community rehabilitation companies in providing support that a 2016 report found that none of those serving a sentence of less than 12 months who were met by the inspectorates had been helped into employment or training after release by through-the-gate. That is absolutely shocking.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for breaking his extremely good speech. The people trying to deliver these services are, whoever they work for, incredibly dedicated and want to do an extremely good job, which many of them are capable of doing, but the problem is the fragmentation of the service, about which I warned the former Secretary of State, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). The former Secretary of State’s words were: “I don’t need any evidence, I don’t need to pilot it; I have inner belief that this will work,” but he was wrong.

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who raises important points on staffing, on the two-tier workforce and on staff morale, which has also been impacted. Time does not permit me to go into detail on that today, but the 4.5% pay gap between those who work in the private sector and those in the national public service illustrates the massive difference between them.

The privatisation of probation has proved to be not just a disaster but a costly one, with the taxpayer being forced to stump up a total of £467 million to bail out private probation companies in what is nothing short of a reward for their damning failures. In return for this bumper payment, the public have received no guarantee that the services delivered by probation companies will improve and no certainty that they will make any investment to achieve that. And all the while, the Ministry of Justice remains happy to continue to throw good money after bad. Despite this colossal bail-out, the financial difficulties of probation companies remain, with a number forecasting losses and with Working Links collapsing and Interserve entering administration earlier this year. The financial failure and collapse of a probation provider, a key component of the justice system, should be unthinkable, but under this Government’s privatisation agenda, that is exactly what is happening as they erode key functions of the state that should remain in public hands and hand them over to private companies.

We have also heard today about the failings in the private prison estate. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) all made important points on this. One of the important things about this debate is that Members on both sides of the House have made pertinent and important points highlighting the serious emergency and the dire situation in our prison and probation systems at the moment. It is disappointing that the Secretary of State opened his speech by referring to the shadow Secretary of State’s contribution as “simplistic, dogmatic and bombastic”. We have an emergency in our prisons, we have a safety issue in our prisons and we have a crisis in our probation service, yet the Secretary of State comes to this important debate and uses words such as those. I find that quite disappointing.

The issues in our prisons were most recently brought to the fore by the prisons inspector’s highly critical report on HMP Birmingham, which has been mentioned a number of times today. The fact that conditions there were so bad and the prisoners so violent forced the removal of G4S as the private operator of the prison. Many Members have referred to individual prisons today, including those in their own constituencies, with particular reference to safety. The Ministry of Justice’s own statistics show that private prisons disproportionately more dangerous, with 156 more assaults per 1,000 prisoners in private prisons compared with those run by the public sector, and that three private prisons appear in the list of the 10 most violent ones. That highlights the points being made by hon. Members today.

As we have heard, the Government know about the huge problems associated with private prisons and they are aware of their failings, yet they are pressing on with opening two new prisons, at Wellingborough and Glen Parva, which will be operated by private companies rather than public sector operators. If the Government are so confident of the ability of private companies, why will they not allow HMPPS to bid to operate Wellingborough and Glen Parva, rather than burying the evidence on why they have not done so? The Prison Officers Association has repeatedly asked for the HMPPS estates and transformation report, but it has repeatedly been denied access to it. This shows that the Government’s plans are driven not by a desire to deliver the best benefits for the public but by ideology, and we are seeing a complete failure by the private sector to stand on its own merits when compared with the public sector.

In conclusion, this debate not only demonstrates the colossal failure of the Government’s privatisation agenda, but represents a staggering row about the Government’s plans for further privatisation in our prisons and to hand larger contracts to the same private companies. There can be no half-measures in the Government’s actions. They must commit not only to ensuring that Wellingborough and Glen Parva are run by HMPPS, not private companies, but to bringing probation back into public control for good. The Ministry of Justice says that it has learned its lessons, so now is the time to prove it. I urge Members to support our motion today.

3.40 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure, after only two working days in office, to close this important debate and to make my first speech to this House as Minister of State for Justice.
I heard a call in this debate, and I will deal with the issue, because my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to whom I pay warm tribute, made a pledge. I have already said this, but I will say it again: I am going to do things my way. I am going to bring nearly 30 years of experience in the criminal justice and penal system to bear upon the serious job that I will undertake. The work of the “10 prisons project” will carry on, and we will see its results in the summer. It will continue in the same determined and urgent way that it has been pursued up to now.

I am here to reflect on the prison and probation services and, indeed, the whole criminal justice system. I want to leave a legacy that will demonstrate that, in whatever time I am given to serve in this office, I will have played my part in making justice neither tougher nor softer, but smarter when it comes to serving the public.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new role. He says that he would like to leave a legacy. Does he agree that the current devolved settlement between Wales and the UK is broken? To fulfil that legacy and simplify the system, we need to devolve justice, prisons and probation to the Welsh Government to enable the smooth running of this broken service.

Robert Buckland: As a proud Welshman, I have a long and deep interest in such issues, and I think greater unity is the way forward. Many excellent lessons have been learned from the Welsh probation system, and they inform our decision making as we reach a final decision on the future of the probation service. At this time, I much prefer to support a Wales-and-England approach when in Wales and an England-and-Wales approach when in England, and we need greater unity.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Robert Buckland: Let me develop my points, and I will give way in a moment.

My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice has proposed a radical, evidence-based approach to put rehabilitation truly at the heart of our prison and probation services. I am delighted to be joining his team, and it is right to pay tribute to and congratulate my hon. and learned Friend, to his job, to which I hope he brings the same tremendous skills as he brought to his previous job as Solicitor General. He was kind to listen to my representations last night about my local probation area in the south of England, which has managed to make the system, as it currently exists, work extremely well. My local service has an outstanding reputation, and in listening to what it says, I am struck by the fact that for it to tear up all the progress it has made under the present system for another system would not help those it looks after. I urge him to consider some form of flexibility in his plans so that the very best that has been learned in the current system can be incorporated into the new system.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I welcome my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to whom I pay warm tribute, made a pledge. I have already said this, but I will say it again: I am going to do things my way. I am going to bring nearly 30 years of experience in the criminal justice and penal system to bear upon the serious job that I will undertake. The work of the “10 prisons project” will carry on, and we will see its results in the summer. It will continue in the same determined and urgent way that it has been pursued up to now.

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The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), as he always does, made some pertinent points about recall rates. It is right to say that the increases are a direct consequence of the fact that 40,000 more offenders are being supervised as a result of the positive transforming rehabilitation changes. It is inevitable that there will be an increase in breaches with an increase in numbers, but I take his point. It is very much part of my consideration and thinking to ensure that, as we go forward, the monitoring and enforcement of orders is as important as the imposition of those orders—in fact, more important in many respects.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chairman of the Justice Committee, who in his inimitable way made the important point that, from the evidence he has heard at length, a mixed-economy approach to prisons and probation is the right one. He spoke about
through-the-gate support, and it is good to note that there is £6 million of funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support people to move away from rough sleeping and into accommodation, which is clearly one of the key gateways away from re offending.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) raised a horrifying case, and I reassure her that a serious further offence review is under way. The Government remain in favour of raising the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving, and we will look to do so as far as parliamentary time allows.

Stephanie Peacock: Exactly when will the Minister do that? The Government have committed to it previously, but we are still waiting.

Robert Buckland: I hear the hon. Lady, and I share her sense of urgency. I cannot promise a specific timescale, but, as a former Solicitor General, I have considerable experience of dealing with such offending, which is a very high priority for me. I am grateful to her for raising it at this early opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) made an important and comprehensive speech. Although I would like to address her many points in turn, it would perhaps be an invidious encroachment on the House’s time, but I look forward to working closely with her, particularly on developing better alternatives to custody. She is absolutely right on that: I have been a sentencer, as a former part-time judge, so I know that it is vital to have integrity in all the options before the sentencer, as a former part-time judge, so I know that it is vital to have integrity in all the options before the sentencer—whether custodial, community sentences or another type of disposal. I take her points very much on board and look forward to engaging with her.

Right and hon. Members made other points about the performance of CRCs. I accept that performance has been mixed, but quick actions have been taken to raise the quality of supervision. For example, telephone supervision was amended last year to mandate at least one face-to-face appointment per month with every offender. Changes were also made to introduce higher standards to more fairly reflect the cost of delivering services. As a result of the ending of the CRC contracts earlier, we will now expect to spend about £1.4 billion less on CRCs than was originally expected.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Buckland: I cannot, because time does not permit me to do so. I am under some pressure and I wish to deal with Members’ contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) was right to mention the excellent performance of his local prison, Guys Marsh. It is a good example of a prison that has had past challenges but, with excellent leadership, is turning around. We are working closely with Guys Marsh to identify the problems of drug issues and of rural recruitment. Indeed, there is a £3,000 income supplement for people who wish to work at that prison.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), in an interesting speech, talked about prisoner welfare and self-harm. I can reassure her that that is taken extremely seriously, with the rolling out of new training on suicide, self-harm and mental health to more than 40,000 staff who have completed their training. That means an improvement in the way in which vulnerable prisoners are assessed and supported. Further work has been done with the Samaritans, which supports the listener scheme to which I referred.

The hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) talked about his local prison. We are taking robust action to respond to that urgent notification by appointing a new and experienced governor and additional operational managers, by making sure that staff undergo intensive training, by increasing the number of searches and by seeking support from national and regional specialists to support a safer regime in that prison. I know that he will be holding me to account and keeping a close eye on that.

May I deal with the role of the private sector and the evidence of the current chief inspector of probation? Dame Glenys Stacey is retiring shortly, and I want to pay warm tribute to her. Her evidence was more nuanced than perhaps has been suggested. In the body of her evidence, she acknowledged that the private sector has brought benefits to the service, particularly with regards to the delivery of IT and training, and innovation in rural areas, where local communities’ needs have been recognised. In her evidence, she acknowledged that a mix of the public, private and voluntary sector working together is indeed a viable and appropriate way forward.

I have answered the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who challenged me about the pledge of my predecessor, and I have answered in the words of Mr Frank Sinatra.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) made an important and interesting speech about the vicious cycle involving coercive control, abuse and perpetration. I want to work with her to improve our understanding of that, because we have done some excellent work in the field of women’s offending. The number of women in prisons has reduced, as a result not just of some target exercise but of increased understanding of the particularly vulnerable position of women, who are often the victims of domestic abuse. I am grateful to her for raising those important points.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) reminded us all eloquently and clearly to respect and support justice and the rule of law. I could not agree with her more, and that is what I intend to do throughout my tenure.

It was suggested that the words of the former Cabinet Minister and my friend, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, were in some way a condemnation of Government. May I assure this House and all hon. Members that, ultimately, the deprivation of liberty is always the responsibility of Government? How that is administered is a legitimate matter for the voluntary and private sector to be involved. As I have said, based on the evidence, I believe we can continue the work that is under way, not only to make our prisons safe, decent and secure, but to make sure that there are viable community alternatives. I look forward to the work ahead and am grateful to the House for its indulgence.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes HM Chief Inspector of Probation’s recent conclusion that the privatised probation system is irredeemably
flawed and that public ownership is the safer option; recognises that the Public Accounts Committee concluded that probation services are in a worse position than they were in before the Government embarked on its reforms; further notes the Government’s decision to return HMP Birmingham to public ownership following repeated failures under G4S; is concerned by the Government’s plans for at least two new prisons to be privately run; and calls on the Government to end its plans to sign new private probation contracts and contracts for new privately-run prisons.

Health

3.55 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any briefing papers or analysis provided to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care or his Ministers since 9 July 2018 including impact assessments of public health spending reductions and any assessments made on falling life expectancy and the minutes of all discussions between the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England on funding pay risks for Agenda for Change staff working on public health services commissioned by local authorities.

A child born at this very moment in the very poorest of communities—whether in inner cities like Manchester or my own city, Leicester, or in towns such as Blackpool or Burnley—will have a life expectancy that is around nine years lower than that of a child born at this very moment in some of the wealthiest communities, such as Chelsea, Westminster or east Dorset, and they will enjoy 18 fewer healthy years of life. Two babies born today could have years of difference in life expectancy and years of difference in healthy living, due entirely to the circumstances into which they are born. The child born in the very poorest of areas is more likely to leave school obese and almost 70% more likely to be admitted to A&E. That child is less likely to receive measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations, more likely to take up smoking as a teenager, and more likely to need the help of specialist mental health services at some point.

Of course, health inequalities have always existed, throughout the 71-year history of the national health service, but nine years of desperate, grinding austerity have brought us record food bank usage and in-work poverty, and seen child poverty increase to 4 million, with 123,000 children today growing up homeless in temporary accommodation—a 70% increase since 2010. Some 4,700 of our fellow citizens sleep rough on our streets, an increase of 15%, and, tragically, nearly 600 of them die on our streets. There have also been savage cuts to public services, including social care, which have left 600,000 elderly and vulnerable people without support. We have seen nine years of all that, and we should be shocked, because the advances in life expectancy that we all take for granted and that have steadily improved for 100 years are grinding to a halt.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out clearly why the Opposition called for this important debate. Does he agree that the fact that for the first time since Victorian times we are seeing life expectancy falling for the poorest women in the most disadvantaged communities in our country, where the cuts have been heaviest, is a sad indictment of nine years of Conservative rule?

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. Not only are there indications that advances in life expectancy are going backwards, particularly for women, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies has been quite clear today in launching its Deaton review:

“In 2001, women born in the 10% most affluent areas could expect to live 6.1 years longer than women born in the 10% most deprived areas; by 2016, the gap stood at 7.9 years.”

That is why we secured this debate.
Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. In my local authority, Sandwell, life expectancy is in the bottom 15% nationally and the childhood obesity rate is more than three times that of the best local authorities, yet although nationally the Government boast that they are investing money in the health service, public health spending seems to be left out. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that there is a big boost to public health spending, so that local area health budgets do not have devastating long-term obligations in future?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and, typically, anticipates the argument I am going to make.

Advances in life expectancy look as though they are going backwards for some of the poorest in our communities, particularly women. Let me take as an example our infant mortality rates, which reflect the survival rates for the very sickest of small babies. Those mortality rates have risen again, for the second year in a row.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Two or three weeks ago I visited a food bank, one of the biggest in the west midlands, and what amazed me was that it had to provide clothing for babies, which struck me as very profound. In other words, at least 20,000 people in Coventry are using food banks, and that tells us the consequences on people’s health. When they have to go to these centres for clothing and cots, does that not say something about austerity under this Government?

Jonathan Ashworth: It most certainly does. Everybody accepts that advances in life expectancy cannot continue indefinitely, but we need urgent investigation into what is happening here in the United Kingdom. As Michael Marmot, the authority on these matters, says: “Since 2010, this rate of increase has halved. Indeed, the increase has more or less ground to a halt.”

He goes on to say:

The first thing to say is that we have not reached peak life expectancy. A levelling off is not inevitable. In the Nordic countries, in Japan, in Hong Kong, life expectancy is greater than ours and continues to increase.”

We need to understand what is happening in the United Kingdom. Surely it can be no coincidence that this halt in life expectancy advances has come after nine years of desperate austerity in our society.

Many of us are puzzled by the fact that, although we know that growing up in poverty means that people get sick quicker and die sooner, and we all accept that it is shameful—the Prime Minister accepts that it is shameful and talked on the steps of Downing Street about wanting to tackle these burning injustices—the Government continue to cut public health services by £700 million, including cuts of £85 million in the current financial year.

The stark reality is that these inequalities are costing the NHS £4.8 billion a year, and we are seeing a growing burden of chronic ill health in society. The NHS long-term plan, with its many laudable goals and ambitions, is simply undeliverable without investment in local public health services and a reversal of these deep, swingeing cuts.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is disgraceful that while we are talking about all those cuts to the health service the Government have provided more than £4 billion in tax giveaways to alcohol companies, which is the equivalent of the salaries of 160,000 nurses?

Jonathan Ashworth: As my hon. Friend indicates, government is about choices. The Government have chosen to give big tax cuts to some of the richest and most privileged people in society while cutting the public health services on which the most vulnerable rely. That tells us all we need to know about the Tory approach to the national health service.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend eloquently linked poverty and life expectancy. Does he agree that when we look at statistics such as the 64,000 people who die prematurely as a result of air pollution, that is focused on poorer people who live near busy roads? When we look at people who die from diabetes who have been force-fed processed foods, there is another correlation. The common theme is partly the support that the Government give to manufacturers of sugar, diesel and so on. That disproportionately hits poorer areas and ends up killing more people.

Jonathan Ashworth: The House has no greater champion of clean air than my hon. Friend. He is quite right—we have to tackle the wider social determinants of ill health, including pollution. We would introduce a clean air Bill. I am disappointed that the Government do not seem to agree that that is necessary.

I shall run through—[Interruption.] The Secretary of State is chuntering. He will have a chance to respond to the points that I have made. We all accept that smoking
is a No. 1 cause of ill health and early death, causing about 115,000 deaths a year. Some 480,000 hospital admissions are attributable to smoking, which is an increase of 6% since 2013. That costs the NHS £2.5 billion a year—it costs primary care £1 billion and social care £760 million—but because of public health cuts, smoking cessation services in communities have faced cuts of £3 million. Over half of local authorities have been forced to cut services. Some local authorities have had to decommission smoking cessation services altogether, and 100,000 smokers no longer have access to any local authority-commissioned support. The number of people using smoking cessation services to help them quit has decreased by 11%—the sixth year in a row that the figure has fallen.

That means that smoking cessation services are, in the words of The BMJ, “withering on the vine as councils are forced to redeploy funding to other areas”

Those cuts will lead to the risk of more people developing cancer and to higher costs for the NHS. It is a similar story with drug and alcohol services, which have seen cuts of £162 million, with more cuts to come this year.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): A family came to see me to tell me about their alcoholic son who, in the past year, had been taken to hospital by ambulance 35 times, and had spent four weeks over that year in hospital. All that they wanted was support services to help him get his addiction under control. The urgent care was there, but that was not good enough for them. It is devastating for him, but it makes no financial sense for the NHS.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes an eloquent and powerful point. She is absolutely right. It makes absolutely no sense to cut alcohol addiction services, as that fails a number of vulnerable people in society and only increases pressures on the wider NHS.

The NHS recognises the pressures on alcohol services. It announced in its long-term plan that it wanted to roll out alcohol care teams in hospitals—a proposal that I made at the Labour party conference last year. At the same time, public health budgets are cutting alcohol addiction services in our communities. Years of investment under the Labour Government in drug and alcohol treatment and recovery centres helped to reduce HIV, hepatitis and drug-related deaths, and also helped to reduce drug-related crime and wider social harms. Yet the number of those receiving treatment and in recovery for alcohol problems has fallen by 17% since 2013. When alcohol misuse costs wider society £18 billion a year in crime and lost productivity, and when drug misuse is also a factor in so much crime, surely these cuts represent the very worst type of short-term thinking—cutting proven preventive services for a short-term saving but ignoring the bigger and longer-term human and financial cost.

What about weight management programmes? The Government pride themselves on their obesity strategy, but when the NHS spends £5 billion on obesity, when there are 617,000 hospital admissions because of obesity, when 18% of hospital beds are occupied by a person with diabetes, when 25% of care home residents have diabetes, and when we have one of the worst childhood obesity rates in western Europe, why are weight management programmes being cut in communities? One GP told Pulse magazine:

“This is crazy. It makes conversations between GPs and patients very difficult. They say, “you tell me that I need to lose weight, but the only help you can give me is advice and a diet sheet printed off Google.”

Another GP told Pulse:

“You try to refer someone for bariatric surgery but they can only have it if they’ve undergone 12 months of a weight management programme—but there isn’t one.”

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing very well. Does he agree that movement is medicine and we need far more physical activity strategies in our NHS? For instance, if we had more ParkRun activities, particularly in working class neighbourhoods, that would help a lot in improving health inequalities in many parts of the country.

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. I hazard a guess that when the Secretary of State stands up, he will talk about the support for social prescribing that he has given to general practice so that GPs can send people for more of this activity. But, at the same time, public health budgets are cutting these very types of activities. One hand does not know what the other hand is doing.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I met Professor Paul Gately of Leeds Beckett University, who set up the applied obesity research centre. He also established Europe’s longest-running weight loss camp for young people, although only the better-off families can now afford it. He asked me to ask my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State why the sugar tax cannot be used to fund some of that work.

Jonathan Ashworth: That is an entirely sensible proposal, and I look forward to the Secretary of State’s thoughts on it. The sugar tax is supposed to be funding more physical activities for young people across the country.

At a time of rising demand, we have also seen £55 million cut from sexual health services. That has meant that half of councils have reduced the number of sites commissioning contraceptive services, with the result that 6 million women of reproductive age live in an area where one or more services have been closed. Prescriptions of long-acting reversible contraceptives—the most effective form of contraception—have decreased by 8% at the same time as abortion rates for women over 30 have been steadily increasing. We have seen an increase in sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis and gonorrhoea while, because of cuts, the number of sexual health checks has dropped by 245,000. I was particularly shocked to hear the evidence given recently at the Health and Social Care Committee by Dr Olwen Williams from the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV, who said:

“We are seeing neonatal syphilis for the first time in decades and neonatal deaths due to syphilis in the UK... We are seeing an increase in women who are presenting with infectious syphilis in pregnancy, and that has dire outcomes.”

That was the evidence presented to the Committee about the impact of these cuts on sexual health services in communities.
What about the cuts to health visitor numbers? Last week, we heard concerns across the House about falling vaccination rates, which fell for the fourth time in a row. Vaccinations are one of the most important public health interventions we can make, and our health visitor workforce is vital to ensuring their take-up. Yet public health cuts and wider local authority cuts have meant that we have lost 25% of our health visitors. Every 12 hours since October 2015, we have lost one health visitor, and there are no proposals to reverse those cuts in the long-term plan. School nurse numbers have gone down, and the case loads of health visitors and school nurses are increasing. As a consequence, parents and small children are missing out. According to the Government's own figures, 14.5% of children are not receiving a six to eight-week review on time, and 24% are not receiving a 12-month review on time. With high caseloads, there are increased risks of abuse or poor health of babies not being picked up, of maternal mental health issues not being picked up and of domestic violence and trauma not being picked up.

We need investment in the wider public health workforce and we need to expand training opportunities. The Government should honour their commitment to pay the public health workforce properly, and especially those on “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions. Last year, when the Government announced a pay increase for staff, they said they would honour that for all public health staff working for local authorities or in the voluntary sector. We are now told that the Government and the NHS are refusing to honour a pay rise this year. I hope the Secretary of State will tell us whether all public health staff employed on “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions will get a pay rise this year.

We are pleased that the Secretary of State has joined us today from the leadership campaign trail. We look forward to his response but, whenever he is asked about public health cuts, he says, “Well, prevention is better than cure.” Who would disagree with that? He never tells us that he is going to stand up to the Chancellor and the NHS. Instead, he says that we are going to have more apps; that is the solution to everything. I am told that he and his old friend George Osborne are now part of a WhatsApp group called “Make Matt Hancock Great Again”—there are some problems that even an app cannot fix.

This is not leadership. Real leadership would be reversing the cuts to public health services and intervening to stop the health inequalities and the rolling back of life expectancy advances. Only Labour is offering that money and what we will do to improve the nation’s health.

We will adopt a health in all policies approach; this Government will not. We will invest in the health and wellbeing of every child and meet our ambition to have the healthiest children in the world. Longer, healthier, happier lives will be our mission. I commend our motion to the House.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): It is a great pleasure to respond to this Opposition day debate on health. It is worth saying at the start that, for all we have heard from the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), today’s debate gives the House the chance to discuss the record £33.9 billion of extra funding that we are putting into health services in the UK, how we are going to spend that money and what we will do to improve the nation’s health.

I will respond to the many points that the hon. Gentleman made and explain why it is important to look at the facts when debating these things, but let me start by being crystal clear about what he is trying to do. This debate should start from a point of welcoming the record investment that is going into the NHS. Instead, all we get is Opposition Members talking down the NHS. I will get on to the details but, before I do, let us remember why we can put £33.9 billion extra into the NHS. It is because we have a strong economy, with record employment, not through increasing the tax that people pay, but by having more people in work paying income tax. [Interruption.] I hear those on the Opposition Front Bench say “No”, but just this morning we have seen record numbers of jobs—yet again, record numbers of women in work and record numbers across the board—which means that we can have this money.

It was Gordon Brown who said, “When you lose control of the public finances, it’s the most vulnerable who pay the price”. It is certainly true that we have had to do a big job of fixing the public finances, but now we are able to put in this record investment to be able to make sure that the NHS is always there in the future.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Change UK): I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman has confirmed that this investment in the NHS, which we should all welcome, is as a result of an improvement in our economy and has absolutely nothing to do with what was written on the side of a bus. In other words, whether or not we leave the European Union, does he agree that this money is guaranteed to go to the NHS and it has nothing to do with Brexit?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We can only fund a stronger health service and we can only fund strong public services if we have a strong economy and that would be put at risk by the recklessness of the Labour party. Let us talk about the details of how we are going to improve healthcare in this country, but let us say first and foremost that we can fund public services only if we can ensure that the economy is run well.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Would the Secretary of State like to address the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) raised? We are seeing a flatlining of life expectancy, with the infant mortality rate having increased for the first time in 100 years. Will he address that in his response, please?
Matt Hancock: As I have said, I will come on to the details because there is undoubtedly work to do. Normally, we work on these issues in a fairly non-partisan way across the aisle. If we take tackling the problems of children of alcoholics, the hon. Member for Leicester South and I have worked together on that, and I pay tribute to the work he has done. In fact, he normally comes to this Chamber—as he did yesterday, for instance—in a spirit of discussion and objectivity to try to improve the health of our constituents. He is normally an extremely reasonable man. He is a very nice man. I know that he agrees far more with me than he does with his own party leader. Generally, he takes the approach of being constructive. I accept, and we accept, that improvements need to be made and we on this side of the House are determined to make those improvements, but we have to start from a basis of objective fact.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a really powerful case. On mortality, I would say that, far from the age going down in Somerset, it is going up. This is a good thing, but the conditions from which people are suffering are getting more complex. This is something we have to address. Indeed, I know the Government are seriously looking at it with many of the models they are bringing in.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) rose—

Matt Hancock: I will give way in a moment, if I may just make a bit of progress.

Of course extending healthy life expectancies is a central goal of the Government, and we will move heaven and earth to make it happen. Yes, that does involve ensuring that the entire budget of the NHS—not just the public health budget, important though it is, but the entire budget of the NHS—and all those who work in it are focused more on preventing ill health. The entire long-term plan of the NHS, which sets out how we are going to spend all the extra taxpayers’ money that is going in, is about focusing the entire NHS more on prevention than on cure. To choose just to look at the public health grant—it is important, but it is smaller by far than the entire budget of the NHS—is entirely to miss the point.

Clive Efford: The right hon. Gentleman must accept that it is not acceptable that, in the fifth richest economy in the world, life expectancy has flattened across the country and in some areas has actually gone backwards. Is that not an indication that wider policy approaches by this Government than just those on health are not working?

Matt Hancock: It is true that across the western world the incredible rise in life expectancy is continuing but the rate of improvement has slowed. Our task here is to ensure that we extend healthy life expectancies.

Clive Efford rose—

Matt Hancock: I have taken the hon. Gentleman’s point. That is the purpose of the entire prevention agenda: to help people to stay healthy in the first place.

Let me give a few examples. The hon. Member for Leicester South talked about deaths of despair, and each one of those suicides is a preventable tragedy, but he did not mention that the suicide rate in this country is the lowest it has been in seven years. We should be celebrating that while also resolving to drive it down further. Similarly, he talked about some of the sexually transmitted infections that are rising around the world, including in America, France and Belgium, but he did not mention that STIs overall are down. Indeed, HIV is down very significantly, and the UK is one of the leading countries in tackling HIV. It is important to look at the objective facts and not just pick out some. Of course there are STIs that we must tackle, and we will, but we must look at the overall picture. I will give one more objective fact: the number of attendances at sexual health clinics has gone up. That is one of the reasons why STIs overall are down.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): When will the Secretary of State meet his commitment to expand the PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—impact trial? He made that commitment some time ago but it has still not been delivered.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I have made that commitment and we have made that available. The NHS is doing its part but some local authorities have not yet chosen to make that available and, because sexual health services are delivered through local authorities, I cannot direct that to happen. What I can do is ensure that I play my part, and I have.

Neil Coyle: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way again; he is being generous. The bottom line here is that there are men who have contracted HIV as a direct result of PrEP not being available. He must get a grip on the situation because he cannot keep passing the buck to local councils. He does have the resources and it is his commitment.

Matt Hancock: We have made those resources available. The resources from the NHS to make PrEP available have been put forward. I find it deeply frustrating that in many areas that has not yet been delivered by local councils. We are working with local councils and urging them to take up the offer that is already available from the NHS. I totally understand and share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration. We are working to push local authorities to do this, but responsibility for public and sexual health services was transferred to local councils, as a result of a decision taken by this House. I am doing my part. I would love to work with him to ensure that it can actually be delivered on the ground because he is absolutely right that it is the right thing to do and the right direction to go in.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The objective fact is that the public health grant has gone down by £700 million between 2014-15 and 2019-20. If a person gets on the tube at Westminster station and travels to Whitechapel station in my constituency, average life expectancy drops by six months at every stop. That is the reality in constituencies such as mine. My appeal to the Secretary of State, if he is serious about tackling health inequalities, is to back local authorities with the resources they need.

Matt Hancock: The public health grant is of course an important part of this, but it is only one part. The overall funding of the NHS is rising by £33.9 billion,
the first £6.2 billion of which came on stream last month. I understand the hon. Lady’s point. That is on the money. On the health inequalities, I entirely agree with her that they should be tackled. Doing so is at the heart of the NHS long-term plan. It is a vital task that we do not shirk. Indeed, we embrace it and are addressing it.

Let me turn to the details of the motion. While I care deeply about making sure that we have the best possible health in this nation and the strongest possible NHS—and we are prepared to put the resources in to see that happen—I also care about good governance of the nation. The way that we are run is one of the reasons this country has been strong over generations, and I believe that using the Humble Address to undermine the ability of experts, clinicians, and civil servants to give me the benefit of their frank and wise advice not only undermines me as Secretary of State, but makes it harder to make good decisions. I know the shadow Secretary of State sits on the Front Bench with revolutionaries, but I thought he was a grown-up. I do not know what his mentor, Lord Mandelson, would make of his posturing today. Of course, we will object to the motion and, if he searched the depths of his heart, he would too.

The hon. Gentleman has obviously had a missive from the Leader of the Opposition’s office—LOTO, as it is called—telling him to present the Humble Address, but it is not his style. I hope that we can get back to debating these issues on a proper motion in the future. I respect and like the hon. Gentleman: he is a really nice guy. If he had asked for the information directly—perhaps he could have sent me a message on the app—

Jonathan Ashworth: I’m not on it.

Matt Hancock: Now that is an insult! There are only two types of people in the world—the people who are on the Matt Hancock app and the people who are not on the Matt Hancock app yet. I can see that the hon. Gentleman falls into the latter category. I digress.

If the hon. Gentleman had asked for the information directly, I would have been more than happy to provide it. To show willingness, I am happy to provide the House with the information requested in the motion. We will republish the impact assessments on the public health grant. They have already been published, but I am happy to do that. We will republish the Office for National Statistics stats and the Public Health England report on life expectancy. We will publish a statement on the “Agenda for Change” decision that he mentioned. It had been released already this week, as it happens, before we saw the motion.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to know about the “Agenda for Change” pay rises, I am delighted to keep talking about them. Perhaps he should ask the 1 million NHS staff who last month received a pay rise of up to 29%, including £2,000 extra a year for new full-time nurses. That came into force at the start of last month. I will debate with him the “Agenda for Change” pay rises any day of the week. Because the Government are running a strong economy, we can afford to put the money in to make sure that under “Agenda for Change” nurses get the pay rise they deserve.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am delighted that the Secretary of State wants me to join his Make Matt Hancock Great Again WhatsApp group. Please add me to it. Perhaps in the group I can get some style tips from him, because he looked rather Alan Partridge-esque in the photos on Friday. I digress.

On Agenda for Change, it was reported in the Health Service Journal that the Government will not honour the pay rise for public health staff such as health visitors, sexual health staff and school nurses—all the sort of staff we have been talking about this afternoon—and that there was a dispute between NHS England and the sector about who will fund that £50 million pay rise. Is he telling us today that the Government will honour that pay rise for public health staff working in public health services?

Matt Hancock: We are honouring the pay rise proposed—of course we are. I love the HSJ, which is an absolutely terrific journal, but it was wide of the mark on that. We are putting in record funding.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Secretary of State has done well in getting the extra money that the NHS needs. Will he briefly summarise what extra service and capacity we will get for that money? It is important to spend it wisely.

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend anticipates my very next point. It is important to get value for the extra taxpayers’ money we put in. I always try to refer to it as taxpayers’ money, because there is no Government money or NHS money. Every single penny we put into the NHS—rightly, in my view—comes from the taxes that people pay, and it should be treated with the respect that that deserves.

Geraint Davies: The thesis of a strong NHS is based on a strong economy, yet will he accept that under this Government since 2010 overall debt has gone from 45% of GDP to nearly 90% of GDP? It is not about tax; it is just borrowed money from a failing economy.

Matt Hancock: No. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of clean air, but I gently point out that dealing with the deficit—the annual amount by which the Government was overspending—is, and must be, the precursor to getting the debt down. Now, thankfully, the debt is falling relative to the economy, but there has been an awful lot of hard work to get us there.

Let us look at some of the things the NHS is delivering. The entire population now has access to evening and weekend GP appointments. More than a million GP appointments a month are now booked online, and consultation increasingly takes place online. More than three million repeat prescriptions are done online. There are more than 2 million more operations a year than in 2010, and we see 11.5 million more out-patient appointments than in 2010. Since last year, more than 500 extra beds a day have been freed up in hospitals.

When it comes to the future, only yesterday we announced that a new treatment aid for brain cancer can be rolled out across the country, benefiting up to 2,000 patients, all because of the extra money we are putting in. My right hon. Friend the Member for
Wokingham (John Redwood) is quite right that in return for the extra taxpayers’ money we are putting in, we must get extra out, too.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Extra investment in the NHS is welcome, but when will the Secretary of State start talking about health visitors, school nurses, drug treatment services and other services funded out of the public health grant—the topic of the debate?

Matt Hancock: The public health grant is settled in the spending review. The NHS settlement has come before the spending review, and the public health grant is only one part of the approach to public health. In 2015, this House agreed, with broad acceptance across parties—I know the hon. Gentleman was not in the House then—that local authorities should take responsibilities for public health, to ensure that the entirety of local authority activity could be focused on better public health.

Public health is not just what happens in the NHS, with councils or in GP surgeries or hospitals. For instance, the Government have taken a global lead in getting social media companies to remove suicide and self-harm content online because of the danger that poses to people’s mental health, and in particular that of children and young people. That is a public health issue. Likewise, the efforts we are making to reduce air pollution in the environment Bill—a broader piece of legislation than just a clean air Act—are about a public health matter. It is not in the public health grant, but it is a public health matter.

Geraint Davies: I know the Secretary of State accepts that the environment Bill is the vehicle to deliver cleaner air, but is he aware that, as it stands, it does not include indoor air quality? Given that we spend 90% of our time inside and that the medical research now shows a cocktail effect of outdoor dirty air conflicting with indoor air that has poisons in it—from sprays, cleaning products, chemicals in furniture and all the rest—if we are to properly tackle the problem of dirty air causing 64,000 deaths a year, indoor air quality has to be included in the environment Bill. Will he press the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that it is?

Matt Hancock: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I are working incredibly closely on this because clean air is a public health matter. The challenge is that, although measuring outdoor air quality is essentially a public matter and in public buildings it may well be a public matter, inside most people’s homes it is far harder to make a direct intervention, but I accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s point. It may be something we can look at in public spaces. [ Interruption. ] He mentions schools and hospitals. I accept the premise of that point and I think it is something we can take away. The same is true inside vehicles, but that is a wider question.

Anna Soubry: I want to come back to the Secretary of State’s answer to my intervention. I am worried because, if I may say so, it is rather simplistic to say—I think this is what he said—that because the levels are falling we can accordingly reduce the amount of money being spent on those services. I would suggest that he listen to the experts and the evidence, because I suspect they will say that we must continue to invest to make sure those reductions continue and to take account of any eventualities. Police spending is a good example of how Government can cut too far.

Matt Hancock: I am glad I took that intervention because that was not the intention I was trying to convey at all. We need to do more to tackle smoking, and we will, and we need to continue to tackle the abuse of drugs, and we will. My argument is that this House decided that public health was better delivered through a broad approach by local councils working with the NHS than separately. On sexual health services, I gently say that many such services—for instance, the provision of PrEP—are preventive, not just reactive. However, the boundary between what is prevention and what is cure in sexual health services is, by nature, more complicated.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I take up that issue of prevention? Earlier this afternoon, the Secretary of State said that he would move heaven and earth to achieve healthy outcomes. When will we see a ban on junk food advertising before the watershed?

Matt Hancock: We have not discussed obesity much during this debate, but the Government have a whole programme to tackle it. That includes tackling advertising
and, in particular, tackling the pro-obesity environment in which too many children grow up. There is a broad range of actions on our agenda, with more to come.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Matt Hancock: I will give way one final time, but I want to leave some time for Back-Bench speeches.

Rachael Maskell: The Secretary of State has boasted about the amount of money that is going into the NHS, but the Government have transferred public health services to local authorities, whose funding is being slashed, and as a result funding for those services is also being cut. Can the Secretary of State say how much of that NHS money will support the role of local authorities in delivering the public health agenda?

Matt Hancock: Local authorities and the NHS work very closely in delivering a huge number of services, and authorities often commission services back from the NHS. I can tell the hon. Lady that between 2013 and 2017, the number of attendances at sexual health centres increased by 13%. The suggestion made by many Opposition Members that there has been a cut in the number of such attendances is not supported by the facts.

We will not rest until we can solve these problems.

Nick Smith: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Matt Hancock: We are putting money in, and we are putting commitment in. The NHS was proposed from this Dispatch Box by a Conservative Minister, under a Conservative Prime Minister, and its expansion has been overseen by Conservative Governments for most of its 71-year history.

Nick Smith: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Secretary of State is not giving way, and we are running out of time.

Matt Hancock: Once again, a Conservative Government are expanding the NHS and planning for the future to ensure that it will always be there for us, with a record £33.9 billion investment and a focus on preventing ill health in the first place. I believe that, from the bottom of our hearts, we all know that we need to deliver.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), I should give a gentle warning to colleagues. Obviously a great many people want to speak, and there is limited time, so there will be an initial speaking time limit of six minutes. I give that warning in advance so that speeches can be restructured.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party and to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As we know, public health campaigns can be extremely successful. They make health improvements in a widespread manner; individual interventions do not have the same effect. However, the work of public health campaigns and departments is not always visible. It tends to take place behind the scenes. Constituents do not often speak to their MPs about these issues. Very infrequently has anyone come to my door to ask about a cervical screening appointment, or about our campaigns and work on obesity. Public health is not the most visible area of our NHS, unlike the frontline issues of access to treatments, accident and emergency waiting lists and access to GP appointments. It does not have the profile that it ought to have, and it certainly does not feature the sensationalism on which the media often want to report. However, it is important to say that public health is fundamental to the health of the nation. Therefore, public health should not be underestimated and should certainly never be underfunded.

Since 2006-07, the annual health resource budget has increased in Scotland by £4.8 billion, and the Scottish Government have passed all consequentials on to health and care. Funding for NHS boards will increase again by £430 million—an increase of 4.2%—and the package of investments in health and social care in Scotland for integration programmes will be £700 million to the better. Health spending per head in Scotland is almost 9% higher than in England, according to Treasury analysis in 2018.

Investment in primary care is essential; our GPs are at the frontline and it is important that we increase funding for that. The Scottish Government have invested over £930 million in primary care, and £30 million will be invested to extend the free personal care individuals have in Scotland to the under-65s. Some £11.1 million will be provided to increase nursing and midwifery bursaries from £8,100 to £10,000 the following year. Again, midwives and nursing staff are on the frontline of our public health achievements.

Young families across Scotland receive the opportunity to have a baby box as soon as their baby is delivered, which is fundamentally to the good; it is about saying, “We know your baby is born; it is the most valuable thing in your life and we want every baby in Scotland to have the same start and to reduce the inequality we know impacts on people’s lives and families.”

We also need to increase our sportscotland funding, and there has been a pledge of 3%. We have discussed obesity today. I was a member of the Health and Social Care Committee when it was looking at the issue, and again this underlines the importance we must place on public health investment. Advertising and marketing campaigns overshadow the work we are able to do because of the huge investment the industry puts into encouraging people to eat and to feed their children the wrong types of food and to give ourselves treats many more times than we should. I have fallen foul of that, particularly since arriving in the House of Commons; our Tea Room has far too many little treats at the
I want to touch briefly on the subject of older adults. Public health campaigns will have to focus on and target older adults in the years to come. We are living longer by virtue of the good health we enjoy as a result of the interventions, treatments and technologies that are now available, but chronic illnesses will be with people for longer and affect many more people.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with a point made to me by a number of my older constituents at an event last week, which is that we need to ensure that sports facilities are providing the right encouragement and opportunities to keep older people active for longer, given that that is crucial for public health goals?

Dr Cameron: Yes, that is an absolutely fantastic point. I was going to mention the fact that our local sports and leisure facility has an agreement with the NHS that GPs can prescribe sports facilities to people so that they can have an exercise regime designed specifically for them. If they can benefit from such a regime, that can maximise their health. All these things actually save money in the long term, and that is why public health is so crucial. We really are investing for the good of the nation.

From my own experience of working in addiction services many years ago, I know that we have to take on board the fact that there are huge levels of comorbidity with mental health. Often, people in addiction services have a history of trauma. They are self-prescribing with alcohol or drugs, and they are not coping with life due to their underlying mental health issues. However, those very same people are often refused access to mental health services treatment until they have dealt with their addiction. That is a circular argument, and those who are struggling with mental health and addiction problems never really get the support that they need or deserve. That is why integrated services in relation to addiction are so important.

Diana Johnson: I am interested to hear about what is happening with drug and alcohol services in Scotland, particularly the 9% budget increase that the hon. Lady mentioned. Has she had the same experience that I have had in Hull, where more and more people on the streets seem to be taking Spice, which turns them in an obvious way into someone who is taking drugs and which is causing real problems on the streets? Is that happening in Scotland as well? We have seen an 18% cut in drug and alcohol services since 2013.

Dr Cameron: This is always a difficult situation, because when people self-medicate, they tend to take the drugs that are available. They may take something that has an impact on their behaviour and personality, which may then have an impact on their life if they become involved in crime and so on. The types of drugs that are coming on to the market seem to lower people’s inhibitions, so they can get into terrible difficulties with the criminal justice system, but their difficulties—their underlying trauma and addiction—are not dealt with. That money is welcome, but we have a long way to go to ensure that we also deal with other issues.

Finally, it is important not to forget about our veterans when it comes to public health. These individuals who have served us may be invisible, silent or hidden in the background, but they need interventions and they need...
us to reach out, I wanted to mention the excellent Veterans First Point service in Lanarkshire for providing counselling without a waiting list to our local veterans to ensure that their needs are met.

I thank everybody who will take part in this extremely important and timely debate. The more that we can do in terms of public health, the better success we will have in years to come in dealing with inequality and the underlying issues that mean those in our society who did not get the best start do not get the chances that they deserve. We can achieve that only by working together on a cross-Government basis, with local councils and within communities, and I look forward to working with everybody in the Chamber who has an interest in moving this issue forward to ensure that progress is made.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. As I indicated earlier, there will be an immediate time limit of six minutes.

5.2 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate about local public health, but the Opposition are seriously off target in calling for it in the first place. Of all Government budgets, the NHS has had record investment since 2010 and, although I am not going to do Labour Members’ work for them, there are stronger cases that could have been made about public funding in other Departments. When we look at public health outcomes since 2010, the Conservatives can point to a good record. The Labour party does not have a monopoly on our health service. There is this assumption that Labour somehow knows best and that the solution is simply more cash and more managers, but that is not true at all. I grew up as a proud Conservative and as a daughter of an NHS nurse—my mother worked for the NHS for 45 years. The NHS has been there for my family, for me and for my baby to be, which is due in July. I love the NHS, and just because I am on the Conservative side of the Chamber does not diminish my commitment to it whatsoever.

I want to speak about Fareham, where there are definite challenges when it comes to health services, such as with the mental health services provided by the Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. I want to put on the record my gratitude to the Secretary of State for meeting me on behalf of some of the families who have been affected by Southern Health’s issues. When it comes to social care, I have met many relatives of elderly residents for whom the system has not worked well, a subject that I discussed in the Chamber some weeks ago.

Notwithstanding those challenges, I want to talk about a fantastic facility in my constituency called Fareham Community Hospital, and I am using my speech to launch a report that I have prepared about a future vision for how we can use the hospital better. When I was first elected in 2015, the No. 1 issue was how to make better use of Fareham Community Hospital. It is a relatively small, relatively new facility in the heart of the constituency, but it remains underutilised, according to several footfall surveys we have conducted. Rooms are frequently booked by various health trusts but still lie vacated, at considerable cost to the taxpayer. Complex lease arrangements render the release of space time-consuming and bureaucratic. There is no coherent public information system or public-facing management to signpost services for local people.

Random and sporadic services are offered. Most recently, phlebotomy and blood testing were removed, much to the disappointment of many residents and to Friends of Fareham Community Hospital, which plays a vital role in co-ordinating volunteers who want to support this asset. In short, the hospital is at risk of becoming a wasted opportunity and a wasted asset.

I set up a Fareham Community Hospital taskforce in 2015 to bring together many of the health providers: the local CCGs; Hampshire County Council; Solent NHS Trust; Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust; Friends of Fareham Community Hospital; Community Health Partnerships Ltd; Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust; and University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust. The sheer number of organisations reflects the complexity of how the hospital is run.

Last year, I ran a constituency-wide survey on how the community would like to see the hospital run better. I am grateful to the many hundreds of people and all the organisations that participated. I am pleased to launch the “Fareham Community Hospital Future Vision” report, which can be found on my website. The report compiles the survey, and it makes seven recommendations.

First, the report welcomes the new primary care same-day access scheme run by local GPs at the Jubilee, Whiteley and Highlands surgeries for the past 18 months, which is a reflection of the historic £4.5 billion commitment at national level for primary and community health. The scheme has been welcomed by the community, and it is working effectively. There is a call for it to be expanded to other GP surgeries. I put on record my thanks to Dr Tom Bertram for leading the initiative.

Secondly, the report recommends that more consideration be given to other clinical priorities. Scanning facilities and using the hospital as a diagnostic centre could be viable options for the future. Thirdly, public health functions should be considered at FCH. A public health hub could support patients with clinical obesity, depression, anxiety and other conditions. Lastly, accessibility is a key theme running through the responses. We need a bus stop at the hospital and a method to enable elderly and ill patients to get to it more easily.

Fareham Community Hospital is a great example of how a local asset is available to a community and how local health providers can come together to make it more responsive to local needs. I am pleased to launch the “Fareham Community Hospital Future Vision” report today, and I hope it provides a starting point for future work.

5.7 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Secretary of State is right to say that the shadow Secretary of State is, indeed, a nice man, but he is far more than that. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) for the tremendous work that he and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) have done on behalf of the children of alcoholics—they are making a tremendous difference.
I will focus on the impact of cuts to mental health services. At a time when there is a welcome all-party commitment to parity of esteem between mental health and physical health, there is an alarming gap between rhetoric and reality. Headline figures too frequently do not reflect the experiences of people at the sharp end. It is widely acknowledged that mental health services were underfunded to start with, and the perpetual cuts we have seen have made matters worse.

A lethal cocktail of cuts to health and benefits has created a shameful epidemic of rough sleeping that is so evident in the towns and cities of our country. Specific Government funding, although welcome, is inadequate and no substitute for the savage cumulative cuts to mainstream services. It is paying for the damage caused by indiscriminate, disproportionate cuts.

I put on record our support for the tremendous leadership shown by the Mayor of Greater Manchester with his “a bed every night” initiative, but that will need considerably more investment from the Government if it is to achieve its noble objectives.

My “Talking About Mental Health” campaign in Bury South has attracted a lot of support from people with mental health issues and their families. It has illustrated a simple truth: one in four people experience mental health problems every year. The campaign is encouraging people to feel able to talk about their own experiences and is galvanising support to improve local services. Cuts have meant too often that people endure long waits for psychological therapy, and are unable to access appropriate in-patient and emergency services. Community support is scarce, and far from services being focused on prevention and early intervention, people can usually access services only in the event of a crisis. Relatives and carers are frequently left to struggle alone.

We have some excellent, innovative local voluntary services, such as the Creative Living Centre, Moodswings and The Friendship Circle, but they are underfunded and cannot be expected to meet the scale of the demand for support. A major concern is the state of child and adolescent mental health services. Although the Government’s pledge of an extra £1.4 billion to transform CAMHS in 2015 was welcome, work by YoungMinds has demonstrated that in the first year of extra funding only 36% of clinical commissioning groups that responded had increased their CAMHS spend by as much as that Government funding.

In my constituency, I am currently advocating on behalf of a number of local parents who have autistic children with mental health problems—I am sure other hon. Members have the same experience. These people are under unspeakable daily pressure, yet services consistently fail to meet their needs. In the light of it being Mental Health Awareness Week, I would like to read part of a blog written by my brave 19-year-old constituent Libby Bean, who describes the realities of living and coping with a mental health condition as follows:

“I found going to many psychologists that it just wasn’t working for me. I didn’t like the by the book exercises and help they would give me and treat my case like every other person as I believed it had to be adapted specifically for me. After several psychologists I tried this one amazing person that I had heard was great for anxiety. Me being me I said I’d try it because”—it was just an opportunity—“to get rid of my feelings of anxiety, I thought how this will be any different to what I have been through before, well I was wrong. This changed my life. They have helped me so much and have been the best support system.”

The point that I am making and that I think Libby is making is that health and local public service cuts are making it harder for people such as Libby to receive the tailored care and support that they need. A one-size-fits-all approach is always destined to fail; an issue as varied as mental health requires personalisation.

Supporting mental wellbeing should be at the heart of any responsible Government’s approach to building a better society. It requires health and local government leadership, and a joined-up, cross-government approach. It requires us to continue the tremendous progress that has been made in recent years in tackling stigma. It also requires the full engagement of employers in the public and private sectors. Parity of esteem and a shift to prevention and early intervention are noble objectives, but disproportionate cuts to local government and underfunding of the NHS mean that the reality is very different. Not only does this make vulnerable people even more vulnerable, but it corrodes trust in politicians and this place. I hope that the Secretary of State will give serious consideration in the future to ring-fencing funding for mental health, so that people at the sharp end genuinely see the benefits of extra funding that is announced at a national level.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that to get everybody in and give them equal time, five minutes will be the order of the day?

5.13 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Supporting the NHS and its values, and securing the best healthcare for my constituents, has always been one of my highest priorities as a Member of this place, so I warmly welcomed the news that the NHS would get the biggest increase in funding in its history, with a £20 billion cash boost. As we have heard today, the demands on our health service are increasing as we grow older as a society, and I would like to pay a warm tribute to all NHS staff, especially those working in and around my constituency at the Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals and in primary care. They do incredible work and we all owe them a great debt of gratitude. We need only to consider some of the statistics that the Secretary of State shared with us, such as the fact that the NHS currently sees 3.3 million more people attending at A&E than in 2010. The number of operations carried out is up dramatically, as are the number of diagnostic tests and out-patient appointments. The NHS is delivering more care than at any time in its 71-year history.

There is much that we should praise about the service but, as we have heard today, we should also acknowledge the challenges and the concern felt about waiting times, about access to new and innovative treatments, about caring for our frail elderly, about dealing with health inequalities and about action to improve outcomes for the most serious conditions, such as cancer. That is why the new funding and the new NHS plan are both so crucial. The goals set out in the NHS long-term plan will greatly improve patient care, and they should also boost productivity in the NHS to ensure that taxpayers’ money is used as effectively as possible and gets to the frontline care about which we all care so much. The key challenge now is to ensure that those goals are delivered in practice.
Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady agree that we also need to tackle the preventive measures covered by public health programmes? It is really important that we maintain public health spending and run smoking cessation programmes and others that prevent ill health from developing in future.

Theresa Villiers: I think there is cross-party support in the Chamber for effectively funding our NHS and public health. Both those spending areas will continue to be a priority for the Government.

I particularly welcome the Government’s commitment that primary care and GP services are at the heart of the NHS long-term plan. GPs are very much in the frontline of increasing healthcare needs, and they are feeling the pressure. I want to see the Government’s £4.5 billion commitment to primary care deliver expanded GP capacity in my Chipping Barnet constituency. The proposals for GPs to be able to call on support from teams of other professionals, such as district nurses and pharmacists, may play a helpful role in relieving the pressure on GP services.

If we are to ensure that patients can get appointments when they need them, we need to train and recruit more GPs. This need is even more intense in areas such as Whetstone in my constituency, where new homes are being built and patient rolls are getting longer. I would like to have the Minister’s assurance that the Government’s target to increase medical school places from 6,000 to 7,500 per year will be met. It is also vital to ensure that whatever reforms are introduced to our immigration system when we leave the EU, we ensure that the new system meets the needs of the NHS and ensures it can continue to bring in skilled professionals from the EU and beyond. It is also important to enable doctors to expand their buildings to improve facilities for patients, and I commend the plans to do so that GPs in High Barnet, Whetstone and elsewhere in my constituency are taking forward.

A third aspect of the NHS plan that I would warmly welcome is the improvement of digital capability, in which respect I wish to highlight an important success in my Chipping Barnet constituency. The proposals for GPs to be able to call on support from teams of other professionals, such as district nurses and pharmacists, may play a helpful role in relieving the pressure on GP services.

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A third aspect of the NHS plan that I would warmly welcome is the improvement of digital capability, in which respect I wish to highlight an important success in my local area. In autumn last year, Chase Farm Hospital reopened in a brand new £200 million state-of-the-art building. It uses the most up-to-date digital facilities, and the new building is significantly improving patient care. It is situated just outside my constituency but used by many of my constituents and is part of the same trust as Barnet Hospital. I campaigned for many years to secure Chase Farm Hospital’s future, and I welcome the great new facilities for my constituents.

I will always be the strongest supporter of the NHS and its values. This debate is an opportunity to celebrate the incredible achievements of our national health service and its staff, but also to recognise that there is a huge amount of work to be done to ensure that the NHS can continue to meet the needs of future populations. We should never ever forget that delivering a strong economy and strong public finances is imperative if we are to continue to have a strong NHS. It is the only way to deliver the funding that the NHS needs to provide the care on which we all depend. A strong economy is vital to ensure that our constituents get the best possible healthcare in the years ahead, and I urge the Government to ensure that they continue to deliver the economic stability and prosperity on which we all depend and on which the NHS depends for a successful future.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for raising her points.

Since 2010, we have seen the Government cut health services and social care by £7 billion. Because of this, we MPs have been seeing local cuts in our individual constituencies. Last week, a constituent of mine came to visit me during my surgery about a new policy that has come into effect. The policy states that a patient will no longer be given prescriptions for over-the-counter medicines for a range of health conditions, even if they qualify for a free prescription. I would say that that is a public health matter.

There are 33 conditions that are part of that policy, from acute sore throat, excessive sweating and period pains to warts and verrucas. My constituent is 64 and has various health conditions that stop her from working. She is on universal credit, which gives her £317 a month, which is much less than she would earn under the Government’s national minimum wage if she were working part time. Because of her low income, she has had to use up all her savings and even pawn her jewellery, which holds sentimental value, to make ends meet. She recently went to her doctors for her hay fever medication and was told that she is no longer entitled to a free prescription. I feel that that is a public health matter. When she disputed the claim, she was told that under the NHS England guidelines they could no longer provide free prescriptions for mild to moderate hay fever.

As a nurse of 40 years, I am dismayed at how poorly NHS England and the Government publicised the consultation. Many people were unaware of this and it just sums up what the Government and their Departments seem to do. Backdoor and underhanded changes: these have been the steps the Government have been taking over the last nine years to move towards privatising the NHS. It brings me to tears to see the changes that NHS England is bringing in, which affect the most vulnerable. Socioeconomically deprived groups too often face the prospect of poorer access to healthcare, a public health matter.

We know that some of the conditions mentioned in the guidance are the first symptoms of more serious conditions and, if diagnosed too late, they can cause long-term complications for the patient, a public health matter. Did NHS England take into consideration single parents and those on low income who are on universal credit? How are they going to afford to pay for medication for themselves and their children under this new policy? That is a public health matter. It is unfair to them—having the right to free prescriptions was their safety net and one less problem to think about. Is this part of the Government’s NHS 10-year plan? To punish the most vulnerable individuals in society? The Government need to review this policy again. It is short-sighted and will have repercussions for their 10-year plan within the public health agenda.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): The NHS is without a doubt a much-loved and vital service. Established almost 71 years ago, it has been under the stewardship of a Conservative Government for 44 of those years, almost two thirds of its existence. The NHS treats 1.4 million
patients every 24 hours. It is literally where we start our life, and a constant support and safety blanket throughout our lives. We simply could not live without it.

That is why the NHS is this Government’s No. 1 spending priority. It is beyond question that this Government have provided the biggest investment ever into our NHS in the post-war period. The scale of the commitment is mind-blowing, at £33.9 billion extra in cash terms by 2023-24. If any other Government had done it they would have been celebrating it and would have spoken of little else. By 2023, we will be spending £157 billion a year—many billions of pounds more than the Opposition proposed.

My mother-in-law, who was a frequent user of the NHS in her later years, used to say to me “You have to be able to cope to be able to care.” I find her words very poignant when talking about our magnificent NHS, because it is vital that we maintain a strong economy to fund the NHS at these record-breaking levels. The biggest danger to the NHS in my view is a dangerous experiment with socialism coupled with a £1,000 billion spending commitment. The NHS will literally be competing with railroads and utility companies and goodness knows what else for a pot of money which will be much smaller due to economic failure.

As someone who has worked in the private sector for most of her life, my approach is somewhat different. The private sector has to work well if the NHS is to have the funding that it needs. There are other lessons that are relevant in my experience. It is reasonable to assume that we can increase efficiency. There are many examples across the NHS and many new ways of working: multidisciplinary teams, primary care networks, integrated services, urgent care centres, Pharmacy First, online GP services, and much more innovation to come as part of the long-term plan.

Nowhere have I seen that endevour for excellence combined with efficiency more than in St Richard’s Hospital in Chichester. I pay tribute to our wonderful staff and the phenomenal record of the whole Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, led brilliantly by Dame Marianne Griffiths. We are extremely proud that our hospital trust is rated outstanding, and was described as effective, caring and well led during its Care Quality Commission evaluation. It is not surprising that the trust has won awards. Over the past four years it has won best organisation in the health service, best education and training in patient safety, and the top hospital award. Marianne has won best chief executive two years running. We need that excellence in all our hospitals across the country.

Before I was elected to Parliament I was lucky to serve on the hospital trust board of governors, where I learned a great deal. Most importantly, I saw its can-do attitude and search for continuous improvement combined with sensible and inclusive leadership that ensured that it delivered great results. For those who doubt that the NHS can make efficiency savings year on year while maintaining top-quality services, Western Sussex Hospitals has managed a surplus every year but one since its creation in 2009, wiping out £20.5 million-worth of legacy debts.

West Sussex County Council has stepped up to the public health challenge, and only last month launched a new joint health and wellbeing strategy, “Start well, Live well, Age well”. Prevention through education is a key component of our health and wellbeing. In West Sussex, we have introduced a winter falls prevention programme, a tobacco control strategy and alcohol reduction initiatives, as well as programmes to counter loneliness, suicide and self-harm. Listening to Opposition speakers in this debate, people could believe that the system is broken. It is not, and that is certainly not the story in my constituency, where I am lucky to work with great people: doctors, nurses, porters and all the other NHS staff.

None of this is to the credit of politicians, who often use the NHS as a political football, spreading nonsense and rumours with threats of privatisation. It is down to the committed people in the NHS doing a great job with strong leadership on the ground. That is now underpinned by the right funding model for the future—the biggest cash injection in NHS history, which is something that we should all celebrate.

5.28 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), with whom I work closely and proudly on the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy.

When the NHS long-term plan was published, the emphasis on strengthening preventive care was a welcome step in the right direction. Good preventive care and public health are kinder and cheaper than the late interventions that are often caused by not addressing issues that could have been spotted earlier.

The Government’s actions since then suggest that their commitment to preventive care was little more than smoke and mirrors. Having loudly proclaimed their commitment to preventive healthcare, Ministers ever so quietly, ever so slily, just before the Christmas recess, sneaked out £85 million-worth of cuts to public health budgets. That money is used for key services, as we have heard, such as preventive mental healthcare, preventive physical healthcare, “stop smoking” clinics, sexual health clinics, and drug and alcohol misuse services.

The Government may say that public health spending is the decision of local authorities, but all they have done is give them the responsibility to care for their communities while leaching away much of the resource that would enable them to do so. Councils’ public health budgets, which fund school nurses and public mental health services, have been reduced by £600 million since 2015. In Cumbria, the public health budget is set to be slashed by half a million pounds, and it is one of the 10 local authorities receiving the least money per head from the Conservative Government. Cumbria’s spending is now set to drop to just £36 per head—barely half the national average of £63 per head, and ridiculously lower than that of the City of London, which receives £241 per head.

The impact of this has of course been tangible. School nurses not only provide a host of services but are a valuable source of health education for children and young people—a place to turn to as they try to navigate the complexities of adolescence. The removal from schools of health professionals who contribute so much to children’s health education means that children are vulnerable to slipping into bad mental, dental and physical health. In 2015, the coalition Government made a commitment to spend £25 million a year on Cumbria’s public health, but cuts to spending since then
mean that Cumbria gets less than £18 million a year. Pernicious, heavy cuts to the public health budget mean that Cumbria now only spends a pathetic 75p per child per year on preventive mental health care.

In the face of this, young people themselves are determined to fight for better mental health provision. In my constituency, the CAMHS crisis service was not available at the weekend or after school hours in south Cumbria until our community campaign forced local health bosses to change this. But we still have an awfully long way to go. Proper investment in public health budgets would allow us to place a mental health worker in every school. The key to young people being resilient and healthy, and to making sure that problems do not become so severe further down the line, is surely to do just that.

The Government’s failure to take prevention seriously puts at risk a range of preventive health measures—physical as well as mental. I very much welcome the Minister to her new role. She is the most senior Blackburn Rovers supporter to sit on the Front Bench since Jack Straw; I hope she does far better than he. The question that she must answer is this: when the Government verbally prioritised preventive care but then cut public health by £85 million, were they being deliberately cynical or was it mere incompetence? Either way, will she fix this matter and restore public health funding to Cumbria and elsewhere so that we can tackle mental and physical health problems before they become tragically serious?

5.32 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), and to talk about the Government’s commitment to public health. This Government are providing an additional £4.5 billion for primary and community health services as part of the long-term plan for the NHS. In ensuring that this plan operates properly, a renewed focus has been put on prevention. When the Prime Minister announced the £33.9 billion funding boost for the NHS, she said that the accompanying 10-year plan must have that focus on prevention. As hon. Friends have said, none of this is possible without a strong economy and without a Government who understand that tackling the debt and the deficit is really important, because we cannot have the services we want unless we do that.

One of the key parts of the plan is the importance of new screening methods. Earlier testing for bowel cancer is one of the issues that will be dealt with. I want to say a big thank you for the grant of £79 million that we got to build new theatres at Musgrove Park Hospital, which is Somerset’s main hospital but also a really big hospital providing services across the south-west. With part of that grant, it is building a whole new endoscopy service and suite. This really will help the population not just of Somerset but of the whole south-west with early diagnosis, which is the way we have to go. We also have a new MRI scanner, thanks to the community, which contributed towards it. That will help a great many people by picking up diseases early.

Somerset has a wonderful record on diabetes. Diabetes is a big issue, and amputations are very costly. One amputation costs £20,000, and a person with diabetes who has a limb amputated—sadly, that is what can happen—unfortunately then has a life expectancy of only five years. Somerset has implemented a diabetes foot pathway, which cut amputations from 122 to 66 in 2017. Not only are people living better and more healthily, but that pathway is saving the NHS a huge amount of money. That is the kind of model we need to put in place.

The public health grant remains ring-fenced, which I am very pleased about, and protected exclusively for improving health, but local government spending on health is not just about the grant. It is about local authorities being able to prioritise what they think is important, and indeed they are, with a range of innovative models in Somerset.

One third of Somerset residents will be 65 or over in 10 years’ time, compared with 21% nationally, and that has to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Somerset County Council is responsible for all adult social care, children’s services and special needs, which take up 70% of its budget. While I welcome the Government giving another £240 million to adult social care and enabling local authorities to add adult social care to their precept, there are still pressing issues in Somerset that must be dealt with relating to the elderly population. Despite a great number of pressures, the council has done really well in sorting out its finances thanks to some tough decisions, but we have to make the resources go further. The council will be the subject of a “Panorama” documentary soon.

We must have better models. One model I want to mention is micro-providers. A list of self-employed, accredited providers can be accessed for all kinds of care and health needs across Somerset, so that people can stay at home, and providers go in to help them. We are using it at home for my family, and it really is a good model. I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), will visit us to have a look at it.

We need to do more. While 92% of our care providers in Somerset are good or outstanding, which is above the national average of 83%, the current spending review needs to acknowledge that the pressures from not only the growing costs of care but being a rural county are different from those in other places. Somerset gets £730 of Government funding per head of population, which is 11% less than the national average. Our school transport gets less money than urban areas, and our public health funding from Government is only £36 a head, compared with £56 nationally. Will the Minister—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

5.37 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): This week is Mental Health Awareness Week, and I fully support the need to break the stigma and talk about our own and others’ mental health. Public health has an integral role to play in improving young people’s mental health, but we live in a country where, because of the actions of the Conservative party, the funding and the ability to access care from trained professionals are being decimated. What happens when we realise that we need support? How long do we have to wait for help? What are we doing to provide support for people who are struggling and their families, who are left to cope without sufficient support? How do the Government
expect to provide support when they have cut £700 million in cash terms of the public health grant to local government between 2015-16 and 2019-20, according to the Local Government Association, of which I am a vice-president?

Today I want to speak specifically about children and young people's mental health. NHS figures show that one in eight people under the age of 19 in England have a mental health disorder, and half of all mental health problems start before the age of 14. I recently conducted a survey of schools in my constituency. In 10 of the 11 schools that have responded to the survey so far, the number of pupils suffering with mental health problems has increased over the last five years. One saw a 15% increase in the last 12 months alone, and all but one have seen these cases becoming more severe.

I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for his chairing of the all-party parliamentary group on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The group's recent inquiry found that 27% of children who are on social network sites for three or more hours a day have symptoms of mental ill health. That stands against 12% of children who spend no time on such sites. The Government's online harms White Paper concurs with research by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which reported that there was "moderately-strong evidence for an association between screen time and depressive symptoms."

The Government need to take real responsibility for the children in this country and their wellbeing. Instead, we have heard that they will support further research without saying what that will be, and that they welcome industry efforts. What parent would feel reassured by that? The industry has taken some steps to regulate itself, but it is obvious that it is not doing enough. Public health cannot be left to businesses, and with the mental health of children and young people at stake, we need to look at the various contributing factors. It is not enough simply to acknowledge the problem and not to address what is seen to be one of the growing risks to our children's mental health and wellbeing.

Let us take the next step of the process: when a child has mental health problems, how are they identified? Teachers are often the individuals on the frontline most likely to spot this need, but they are working with larger classes and increased pressures, without teaching assistants or additional support. Schools in my constituency and many across the country are doing an amazing job in trying to make appropriate provision for their pupils to deal with mental health problems—from developing their own wellbeing support to check-in sessions and peer mentors—but this is not sustainable. Schools in my constituency have told me that immediate support is usually unavailable to vulnerable children and parents; response times from overburdened mental health agencies are poor; there are long waiting lists; and early help support is limited. Because of the fall in the ability to access core public health services, schools are forced to pick up the slack despite often not having had the appropriate training or resources to do so. A quarter of 11 to 16-year-olds with a mental health disorder have self-harmed or attempted suicide, and that figure rises to as high as 46% among teenage girls with a disorder.

The Children's Commissioner has said: 

"There is a danger that we continue to have a system that fails to help children until they are so unwell that they need specialist intervention."

Funding pressures mean many councils are being forced to cut early intervention services that support children with low-level mental health issues and avoid more serious problems in later life, which cost far more over the coming decades. If we are to improve provision of preventive and early intervention services, it is vital that the Government adequately fund public health in the forthcoming spending review, as reducing spending on public health is short-sighted and irresponsible at the best of times.

5.41 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegoo), I am disappointed that in this debate we are using health once again as a political football, and that we are constantly talking down the NHS. I say that as someone who still works in the NHS, as you can see, Mr Deputy Speaker, from my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am still working in the NHS, and for the staff and those working day in and day out, it is depressing not to have some of the many achievements recognised.

Where is the recognition that this year, after huge investment and better co-ordination, we have seen no winter crisis? In previous years, there were urgent questions demanding answers year after year, but the Government have delivered on that. My local council in East Sussex got £2 million this winter, and despite an 11% increase in demand, there was a 33% reduction in delayed discharges. That is because social care and healthcare are working better together.

Where is the recognition of the achievements in tackling breast cancer? Mortality rates for breast cancer are down 38% since the 1970s and down 22% in the last decade, while they are predicted to fall further by 23% in the next decade. That is personal for me because I lost my mother to breast cancer when I was a teenager, and four of my aunts. If they had been diagnosed now, their chances of survival would be so much better. That is down to improved early detection and screening, improved treatments for many of the difficult-to-treat breast cancers, and improvements in follow-up and early detection. And where is the recognition for cancers overall? According to Cancer Research UK, mortality rates for most cancers are predicted to fall between now and 2035.

Where is the recognition of the progress made on HIV? According to the Terrence Higgins Trust, in relation to overall mortality for those aged between 15 and 59 who are now diagnosed early, for the first time ever their life expectancy is equal to that of the general population.

Where is the recognition of improvements for stroke outcomes? In its “State of the nation” publication, the Stroke Association says that stroke deaths have now fallen by half since the 1990s. That is because we are reducing risk factors, detecting early risk factors early and getting treatment started within an hour of a stroke happening. The stroke call that now goes out in A&E when someone arrives, with the urgent CT and the anti-embolism treatment, means that people do not just survive a stroke, but live better lives after a stroke. That is so important, given that stroke now causes almost twice as many deaths as breast cancer. Smoking rates have fallen, as the Secretary of State explained; 14.9% of
people now smoke, compared with 19.8% in 2011. TB rates have fallen by 40%, whereas under the previous Labour Government they were actually increasing.

We have much to celebrate in public health and in the NHS, but there is no doubt that we could do with more funding. I say that as a Member for an East Sussex constituency, where life expectancy is higher than the national average, because so many people retire to the south coast—we have the highest number of 85-year-olds in the country. As I mentioned in a recent debate, we would like another four-year funding settlement for social care, so that we could make better plans for our ageing population.

I will conclude with the facts that I would like to see included in the Humble Address to Her Majesty, because this is not just about complaining about what we have not got. Perhaps the Labour party would like to explain to Her Majesty why it voted against the £16 billion of public health spending between now and 2021, and also to Her Majesty why it voted against the £16 billion of this is not just about complaining about what we have included in the Humble Address to Her Majesty, because so many people retire to the south coast—we have the highest number of 85-year-olds in the country. As I mentioned in a recent debate, we would like another four-year funding settlement for social care, so that we could make better plans for our ageing population.

I will conclude with the facts that I would like to see included in the Humble Address to Her Majesty, because this is not just about complaining about what we have not got. Perhaps the Labour party would like to explain to Her Majesty why it voted against the £16 billion of public health spending between now and 2021, and also why it has not supported the £20 billion a year for the NHS, or the extra £4.5 billion for primary and community health services. As those on the Government Front Bench will know, I am often a critical friend of the Government, but I would like to stand on facts, rather than causing political mischief.

5.46 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the debate, as public health cuts are having a dramatic impact across the country. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 pushed responsibility for sexual and public health services from the NHS to local authorities—from national oversight to a postcode lottery. In Rotherham, we are fortunate that the contract for sexual health services was retained by the NHS. Others in south Yorkshire were not so lucky, leading to patchy provision by private providers, increasing waiting lists and services being shut.

Public health funding is vital for preventing sexual disease, but it is also important in recognising sexual harm and responding to it. When I visit Rotherham’s sexual health clinics, I am constantly struck by how, for many, they are often the first port of call for disclosing sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and modern slavery. We need to build a healthcare system that is ready to support victims of the most horrendous sexual crimes, not one that is driven by profit.

Sexual assault referral centres have a key role to play in the matrix of support for survivors, and I have been encouraged by recent investment in them. However, England has only 47 of the 71 SARCs recommended under the Istanbul convention. People are not aware that they can self-refer, and that SARCs are also for past sexual abuse, not just recent rape. The Government need to do more to promote that information.

The all-party parliamentary group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which I chair, last week published a report following a six-month investigation into support for adult survivors. Some 89% of survivors told our inquiry that their mental health had been negatively impacted by child sexual abuse, but only 16% said that NHS mental health services met their needs.

Survivors said that they want the specialist voluntary sector to provide them with counselling and support. Our research found that specialist voluntary sector agencies receive, on average, 13% of funding from local authorities and 14.5% from clinical commissioning groups. However, when I asked the Department of Health and Social Care for its assessment of the effectiveness of CCG funding of therapeutic services for survivors, I was shocked to find that it does not even collect data. Does the Minister agree that the Government need to get a grip on the effectiveness of commissioning specialist voluntary sector services and that they should start by collecting the right data?

Survivor after survivor told the APPG of disappointing interactions with NHS staff who were often poorly equipped to respond to disclosures of child sexual abuse and ill-informed about the services they could refer patients to. The Minister needs to ensure that frontline professionals, including GPs, sexual health nurses and social workers, are trained in trauma-informed practice, so that survivors receive a service that is empathetic, empowering and appreciative of the impact of trauma.

Today’s debate is rightly framed around reversing the cuts in public health spending. This is a sorry, short-sighted state to be in. The Health Foundation calculates that an additional £3.2 billion a year must be made available just to reverse the impact of Government cuts to public health services.

The APPG’s inquiry found that as our understanding of the scale of sexual violence and abuse grows, and ever more survivors come forward looking for support, the Government should meet the challenge by launching a nationwide public health campaign that raises awareness of the impact of child sexual abuse on survivors, tackles myths and stereotypes and directs survivors and professionals to information and support. Does the Minister agree that we have a moral duty to provide survivors of sexual abuse with the knowledge they need to make decisions about their own recovery, especially in the absence of knowledgeable professionals and access to public services? Will she therefore lobby the Chancellor to make a serious commitment to ring-fence funding for all sexual and public health services in the next spending review and to make sure that some of the money is dedicated to services and information for victims and survivors of sexual abuse? Any less is a dereliction of duty.

5.50 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): We are talking about preventive health care, and I want to focus on podiatry and its workforce. This place has supported changes to the nursing bursary, and I continue to support those changes for students, but they are having an impact on mature students that I do not think was intended. We all have feet, which we need to look after; and if professionals help to take good care of our feet, it can avoid problems in the future. We all need the podiatrists and others who work to care for our feet.

Plymouth University has recently announced that because of changes in applications for its podiatry undergraduate programme, it will be unable to run the course from September, so in the south-west, especially Cornwall and Devon, no one will train in podiatry. We all know that when people train in an area, they tend to stay there.
Rebecca Pow: The diabetes foot pathway relied on opening eight podiatry clinics across Somerset. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the podiatrists who are helping to solve the diabetes problem?

Derek Thomas: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I attended a conference 18 months ago at which the podiatrists and Plymouth University mentioned the risk of this happening. We are now seeing that prophecy being fulfilled. I appreciate what my hon. Friend says about what has been done to improve the pathway and reduce lower limb amputations. We must not see that good work reversed.

When it comes to caring for our feet, we are heading for a perfect storm. Fewer people are going into training because of financial barriers, and in 10 years we will see an enormous amount of podiatrists retiring from the profession. That adds up to a real challenge that we need to address quickly. I ask the Minister to look at what has happened since the nursing bursary was removed for mature students and whether we can address that.

The impact on patients is severe. Type 2 diabetes is the fastest growing health threat facing our nation, and 3 million people are living with it. That figure is set to reach 4 million by 2030. Diabetic foot care costs the NHS in England between £1.1 billion and £1.3 billion a year—£5.7 million per clinical commissioning group. It accounts for £1 in every £100 spent, more than the combined cost of three of the four most common cancers. Some 80% of the 135 lower extremity amputations each week in England are preventable through good foot care, and the Government have made a commitment in legislation and policy to provide safe care. That is just one example of how, if we do not get this right, we will fail to avoid the impact on patients of more lower limb amputations and lower life expectancy. The facts show that after a lower limb amputation, life expectancy is reduced to about five years.

There is also an impact on the NHS. I have mentioned the sheer cost of caring for lower limb problems, and it will have an impact on multidisciplinary teams if we do not keep people with the skills coming through. It will also have an impact on budgets. As well as the impact on social care and the budgets for those delivering support in people’s homes, making changes around a home because someone has had a lower limb amputation is a costly affair that is easily avoided if we get it right and get enough podiatrists on the ground.

There is an urgent need for action. I ask the Government to look at why mature students are uniquely impacted when going to study these important professions. If a mature student is in any sort of benefit—housing benefit or other financial support—the minute they take out a student loan to study to be a podiatrist, they lose all that support. Perhaps the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions need to look at that, because that is a significant barrier to people coming into a skill we so badly need.

I ask the Minister to look at solutions to reverse the reduction of mature students going into important parts of the NHS such as podiatry so that we can save money for the future, to be used where needed, and provide a real opportunity to improve people’s lives.

5.55 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my colleague the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), who serves with me on the Health and Social Care Committee. I warmly welcome the new Minister to her place, but if she thought she would learn about public health in the debate, she will be sadly disappointed. I and Opposition colleagues have sat and listened to Government Members talk about anything other than public health. It is so disappointing that Government Members do not seem to know what public health is.

I really care about public health. I care about it so much that, after spending five years training to be a doctor and another four years training to be a GP, I did a master’s degree in public health. It is so important because it is about health inequalities and the massive gap in life expectancy, which we are seeing increasing. I represent the town of Stockton-on-Tees, where the life expectancy gap between men living in the most deprived areas of town and those in the wealthiest is more than 11 years; for women, it is more than 16 years. Much of that is because of the inverse care law that tells us that the people with the highest need are those least likely to access healthcare. Those with the highest need for cervical screening are least likely to access it. Those with the highest mental health problems are less likely to access those services. Those with the highest needs for smoking cessation services are least likely to access them. Investment in public health makes economic sense, because prevention is better than cure, and it makes really good social justice sense.

Tempting as it may be to invest in another building or buy another machine that goes ping, the real difference that can be made to health inequalities and public health comes right at the beginning of life. The first 1,000 days are where most health inequalities are sown. It was a privilege recently to chair the Health and Social Care Committee’s inquiry on the first 1,000 days of life: a time when developing brains make a million new connections every single second. If we get it right then, we can build healthy minds and healthy bodies, but if we get it wrong, that can cause all kinds of problems.

The fact is that more than 8,000 children in this country live in homes with the triad of a parent with a mental health problem, a parent with substance misuse problems and domestic violence. What intervention will make the real difference? How can we help those children? That is done largely through the work of health visitors, and I am afraid that since public health funding and the responsibility for public health was transferred to local authorities, we have seen a cut of 2,000 health visitors employed by the NHS and 1,000 Sure Start centres have closed.

These are the things that make the real difference. They make a difference to breastfeeding, of which our rate is one of the lowest in Europe; to child mortality, our levels of which are much higher than those in comparably rich countries; and to detecting the hidden half of women with perinatal mental health problems who say they were not detected by health services.

I hope that it has not been a deliberate strategy to disinvest from these important services. I think that it has happened by accident. Either way, we have to make a difference; the situation must be rectified. I welcome
the work of the cross-departmental ministerial working group that the Leader of the House is leading, and I hope that the new Minister is lobbying the Treasury and making a passionate case for investment at the start of life.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the importance of public health, especially in the early years. In Blaydon, which is part of Gateshead Council, the public health budget has reduced by 15% since the transfer of health visitor services, which has led to the loss of services that make a big difference to people on the ground. Is it not a shame that we are losing vital public health services?

Dr Williams: It is painful that that is happening in places such as Blaydon, where life expectancy is declining. Life expectancy in the north is declining, and there are huge life expectancy gaps between north and south. It is the very part of the country where we should be investing in public health, not making cuts. In Stockton-on-Tees, public health has been cut by £1 million in the past two years.

What do we want? It is 10 years since the Marmot review set out the evidence base for how to reduce health inequalities. We should be doubling down on investment in health inequalities. We should be investing in sexual health services. We should be investing in drug treatment services, which nationally have been cut by 16.5%. Instead, we see year-on-year funding reductions, public health is being cut to the bone, life expectancy is falling and health inequalities are rising. The Government need to show an absolute commitment not just to treatment services but to grassroots prevention services in communities up and down the country, and they must invest properly in public health services. Local authorities are the right place for them to be, but they have to be properly funded and supported.

6.2 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), but I want to put it on the record that Conservative Members understand and appreciate the importance of public health. I have heard several contributions from hon. Friends about exactly that. I am grateful that public health is at the heart of the long-term plan for the national health service and that investment is already going into it.

My constituents would not forgive me if I did not start by talking about the Alex Hospital in Redditch, which is the No. 1 concern for me and my constituents. Yes, we are having a debate about public health, but this takes its place at the heart of that. It is not just about funding—a lot of money has been invested in the Alex for wards, infrastructure and facilities thanks to all our lobbying, but that is not enough; it is about how that money is managed across the trust. Unfortunately, services were centralised in Worcester, and that is not working for my constituents. I welcome the Minister to her place, but she will definitely receive more visits and correspondence from me on this issue. I have an Adjournment debate tomorrow night, so I will not steal my own thunder, but I want to place it on the record that it is very much about leadership, making services work across a county and getting the right outcomes for patients and my constituents.

One of the causes close to my heart is the menopause. Anyone who has been watching BBC’s “Breakfast” programme this week will know it is featuring it as part of its menopause week. It is brilliant that people are brave enough to talk about their experiences. This is a taboo subject, but we are starting to talk about it in this Chamber, and I have received cross-party support, which is fantastic. This goes to the heart of what we are talking about: prevention and public health. It is about educating primary care providers and GPs to do the right thing when prescribing for women entering the perimenopause and the menopause and to understand that it is not just about having hot flushes and those other stereotypical symptoms but that there can be hundreds of different symptoms. Every woman is different. There is widespread ignorance, but when women visit their GPs, very simple treatment should be available. This does not cost money. It is just a question of ensuring that GPs are in the right place to prescribe what those women need: treatment that will make a transformative difference to their lives, and will enable them to continue to contribute at work as well as in their families and communities. I hope that the Minister will recognise the importance of this issue, because it affects not only women; it affects every man who has to work with a woman or is related to a woman. That fact is often hidden, and we need to break down the stigma to an even greater extent.

My third point concerns technology. We are talking about prevention, and technology plays an important role in that. I have been a tech entrepreneur, and I was delighted to learn about a service called GP at Hand, which was released recently. I have been using it, and it has made a massive difference to me. We are all stuck here, and I do not know about other Members, but I find it very hard to make an appointment to see my GP. However, I have an app on my phone. I need only log on, and I can secure an appointment within five or 10 minutes.

Let me add, before Members jump up and say it, that we all know that that service will not work for everyone. Of course it will not work for complex patients and vulnerable people who are not able to use technology. However, if it can work for people who are confident and comfortable with technology and can embrace it, it will make a huge difference in freeing up more resources for the patients who need more care and support in the GP’s surgery. I think that the two services can work side by side. What we need to do in the long-term plan for the future is embrace what technology can do and spread that across the country. There needs to be a real impetus behind solutions such as GP at Hand which provide more time for talking to people who need a lot of support, including mental health support. It really is a brilliant service, and it is free to use in London. I believe that it is being piloted, and I very much hope that it will extend across the country.

I commend the Government’s efforts, and their focus on public health. Let us not forget that if it were not for a Government who set out the economy and enabled it to grow, we would not have this multi-billion-pound investment. I believe that £157 billion of public money will have been invested in the NHS by 2023.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): For the first time since the 1890s, we are seeing a slowdown in health improvements, including, as we have heard, a flattening in life expectancy. However, that varies in different parts of the country. Men’s average life expectancy in Windsor and Maidenhead is 81.6 years, while in my constituency it is 77 years. As well as the data from the Office for National Statistics, we have information from the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries that falling longevity has accelerated. Last year’s analysis cut forecast life expectancy by two months, and this year it took off another six months. Since 2015, it has fallen by 13 months for men and 14 months for women. That renders the Government’s increase in the state pension age an absolute nonsense, and is rather cruel to women born in the 1950s.

Healthy life expectancy — how long we expect to live in good health — has also declined for women, by three months between 2009 and 2011. That, too, varies across local authority areas, by 21.5 years for females and 15.8 years for males. Our children have been affected as well. As the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health reported last year, infant mortality is on the increase for the first time in 100 years. Four out of 1,000 babies will not see their first year, which is an indictment of the fifth richest country in the world. We are also seeing increases in child mortality, linked closely to the poverty that children are experiencing.

Why is this happening? It is absolutely true that the cuts in public health spending which were described so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) have played a part, but they are not the only cause of the decrease in life expectancy and other problems. We know that investment in the NHS has been far from perfect, and it should have been at least £30 billion by 2022 instead of the £20 billion that has been promised. The coalition Government have a lot to answer for with the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which championed the outsourcing of NHS contracts to the private sector among other things. There is also strong evidence that that has contributed to not only increases in inequality in access to health care but inequality in outcomes.

There is clear evidence, as many of us predicted, of the impact of the coalition Government’s and this Government’s wider austerity programme. It has widened the inequalities of income, wealth and power and contributed particularly to the premature deaths of many of our citizens.

I welcome the launch today of Sir Angus Deaton’s inquiry to review inequalities across our country, and I hope it builds on the evidence Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson produced in their totemic publication “The Spirit Level” a decade earlier. However, we also need to explore other aspects of inequalities that have been not yet been investigated, such as the inequalities in power and the rise of nationalism.

I also hope that the inequality review analyses evidence presented at a recent event I chaired. Professor Danny Dorling referred to Office for National Statistics data published the day after the EU referendum showing that there were 52,400 more deaths than the previous year. This was the seventh largest single-year increase in deaths after cholera caused an increase in 1849. The evidence showing a correlation with austerity, as people’s long-term care needs were most affected, is compelling. We now have the 10th lowest level of public spending out of 12 developed countries, and in 2018 some 1.4 million older people had unmet care needs.

Professor David Taylor-Robinson provided evidence showing that the impact of austerity is also taking its toll on our children. His report, “Due North”, provided evidence of the north-south divide and the impact on health, including child health. We now have the worst child health in western Europe and rising child mortality, which is clearly associated with child poverty.

The Government’s first duty is to protect their citizens. For our children, our old people and our disabled people, it is clear this Government have failed and I urge them to take this more seriously.
I am concerned, however, that we are struggling locally with recruiting nurses, especially at hospital level, where a number of nurse places have been vacant for a long time. We have to be honest with our constituents about this: a number of the EU staff have left the UK, and we need to resolve the uncertainty over Brexit. We need to reassure the staff that we care for them. There has been a drop-off in the number of people applying to nursing college, particularly among older people, and that needs to be resolved. I am also concerned to hear from many of the senior doctors in my constituency about the impact that pensions and taxation are having on them.

On the positive side, I have heard about new treatments, especially for diabetes. My diabetic patients can now get continuous glucose monitors, which they have never been able to have before. However, other treatments are still needed. My poor constituent Cait is nine years old and she desperately needs Kuvan for her phenylketonuria. It would also prevent many other diseases. Any other country in Europe would prescribe it, but we do not.

We are the world leader in many areas of medical research—we lead the world in genomics, for example—but we must ensure that the treatments that are developed here are prescribed here, otherwise, we will lose that research. One area of research that particularly impressed me was dementia research. We were told on a recent visit that a quarter of dementia cases might be preventable, but that will involve understanding the condition much earlier—decades before the symptoms become evident. We need to be able to identify those at risk and ensure that they get the right treatment. That is why I am so pleased by the long-term plan. It is already putting those words into action to ensure that we can deliver a world-class NHS for the future.

6.17 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Air pollution—the silent, invisible killer—is now leading to 64,000 premature deaths in Britain each year. The figure was thought to be 40,000 by the Royal College of Physicians, but it has now been updated by the European Heart Journal. Pollution is moments that are developed here are prescribed here, otherwise, we will lose that research. One area of research that particularly impressed me was dementia research. We were told on a recent visit that a quarter of dementia cases might be preventable, but that will involve understanding the condition much earlier—decades before the symptoms become evident. We need to be able to identify those at risk and ensure that they get the right treatment. That is why I am so pleased by the long-term plan. It is already putting those words into action to ensure that we can deliver a world-class NHS for the future.

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6.22 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies). I want to talk about the impact of public health grant cuts on Rochdale Borough Council, which serves both my constituency and the Rochdale constituency. Reductions in the public health grant will inevitably have an impact on a wide range of services and on the ability to plan and deliver prevention. The Rochdale borough public health team takes a broad view of health and wellbeing, seeing it as being influenced by health behaviours, wider determinants of health, such as housing and education, and relationships with others.

Local public health work is about much more than health promotion and telling people what is good and bad for them. It includes support for youth services and libraries and for victims of domestic abuse. It involves training to help to prevent suicide, support for volunteering, and reducing the impact of alcohol and drug abuse.

The work of the public health team also includes supporting people in residential homes to improve their oral health and nutrition. It includes seeking funding
from grant-giving bodies to improve local health. Importantly, the work involves helping to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. However, as we have heard, cuts to sexual health services are leading to an increase in the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. In Greater Manchester as a whole, the abortion rate is rising as access to sexual health services and contraceptive help and advice diminishes.

The work of the public health team also includes providing direct input into NHS commissioning and providing essential support for NHS services. For example, while the NHS provides cancer screening, it is work within our communities that helps to get people to attend appointments. The public health team works to increase attendance at NHS health checks and to get people tested for diabetes, which can result in lifestyle changes and real savings in treatment costs. With Heywood, Middleton and Rochdale having one of the north-west’s highest rates of type 2 diabetes, the importance of this work cannot be overemphasised. The public health team works to reduce smoking, especially in poor communities and among people with long-term conditions. When NICE looks at such prevention work, it is always shown to be highly cost-effective.

To give an idea of the health challenges facing my community, a man or woman living here in Westminster can expect to live, on average, five and a half years longer than a man or woman living in the borough of Rochdale. Such health inequalities exist here in London, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) tells me that for every tube station from here to Queen’s Park there is a year’s reduction in life expectancy.

Yet such health inequalities are not compensated for by increased funding. In the borough of Rochdale, the public health grant is now £3 million lower than it was in 2016-17—decreasing from £19.7 million then to £16.7 million in 2018-19. For this financial year, 2019-20, the budget has been cut yet again to £16.3 million, giving cumulative cuts over the past four years of over £8 million. That has led to cuts in support to HIV charities, children’s playgroups, physical activity events, pest control, smoking cessation services and other much-needed vital services.

A reduction in the public health grant has to be considered in the context of wider council savings and the contribution of public health. As cuts to services and support have to be made due to a reduction in funding, the inevitable result is additional hardship for residents.

The choices we face are stark. Do we stop support for a necessary service such as help for domestic abuse victims, or do we not recruit much-needed staff? With the shocking news that we are seeing the return of diseases of the Victorian era—cases of whooping cough, malnutrition and scarlet fever are all increasing—this Government cannot be complacent and must take another look at their false economy of cutting public health funding.

6.27 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who brings her health expertise to this debate.

The discord between the Government’s narrative and reality could not be more stark. The long understood centrality of public health to addressing health inequalities was ably brought to the fore by Michael Marmot’s report a decade ago that highlighted the social determiners of poor health. We therefore cannot just look at health in this debate; we have to look at the wider impact of health across our society.

Of course the Government’s 10-year plan and long-term approach are welcome, but the reality is that there are serious funding cuts to the delivery of public health by local authorities. Half a million pounds is proposed to be slashed from York’s public health spending, which will have an impact on the services to be delivered.

Public health is about the long term, and the disadvantage for local authorities is that, with their strained budgets, they are having to focus on the emergencies today. Of course, local authorities have no levers over the NHS, which ultimately picks up the tab for the failure to deliver a public health agenda. Controls over the system is not in the right place.

Of course, the advantage of moving public health back out of health and into local authorities is that it impacts on education, the environment, the economy, housing and the wider community. We are deeply worried about the ending of public health grants. To date, there is no clear vision of how public health will be funded as we move past the comprehensive spending review. The clock is ticking and plans need to be made now.

In York, the health inequality is eight years between Clifton, the poorest area of my city, and the richest area. The council has slashed long-term contraception services, which has meant a rise in the number of unwanted pregnancies. Health checks have been cut, although they are a major intervention in prevention. We have also had smoking cessation services ceased; in 2010, we had 1,948 people using the smoking cessation service, whereas last year we had just 92.

On substance misuse, I must thank my friend Councillor Michael Pavlovic, whose forensic scrutiny of drug and alcohol service funding highlighted the serious £550,000 cut over a five-year period when usage was at a crisis. Shockingly, the drug death figures for York are the worst not only in Yorkshire, but in the whole country. The Government have not been taking a public health approach to substance misuse and it is vital that that now moves into a public health arena.

We have also seen alcohol being used hazardously in York, with 7% of my constituents—15,000 people—doing so. Some 10% of accident and emergency admissions were alcohol-related in 2014, and in December last year it was found that 33% of admissions to York Teaching Hospital involved people who were using alcohol. Of course, that leads to premature death. We also see the impact it has on the criminal justice system, with 75% of arrests involving alcohol. Alcohol is the influencing factor in a third of crimes. So investing in public health saves not only NHS spend, but wider service spend. Of course alcohol has an impact on the safeguarding of young people. In York it also has an impact on domestic violence. Yet York has 799 premises that sell alcohol. We know there is cost, risk and devastation, and we know there is an impact on wider public services, families and wider society. We therefore need a more comprehensive approach and properly funded public health services.

I ask the Minister whether the Government will look again to ensure that there is a comprehensive screening programme for people across the country, so that they
can check in at the key point and transition phases in
their lives to ensure their mental and physical wellbeing
is reinstated. Local authorities being able to cut these
services is of serious detriment.

6.32 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The health of the population should be the Government’s
and Parliament’s highest priority. From the times of the
ancient civilisations, enlightened authorities have sought
to prevent disease, provide clean water and sanitation, and
enable citizens to live long, healthy lives. In the UK, we
have a long history of interventions to improve the health
of the nation, from the great sanitation projects
in the Victorian era, to the Clean Air Acts, slum clearances
and inoculation programmes in the 20th century, and the
public smoking ban in the 21st century. Of course, all
of that was accelerated with the establishment of the national
health service, yet in these first decades of our new century
it is clear that something is going seriously wrong.

With all our medical and scientific advances, surely
we should have ended preventable disease, enabled many
more years of healthy life, and witnessed ever-lengthening
life expectancies. But we know that the opposite is true,
as many right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out. We face an explosion of obesity and obesity-related
diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and coronary heart
disease. We are in the depths of a mental health crisis,
with ever-growing demand for ever-diminishing mental
health services. Society faces the health risks from smoking,
alcohol and drug misuse, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The thing that should make us really angry is the stark
difference in health and life expectancy between rich and poor. These inequalities in health are a terrible
scar on our society, no matter which side of the House
we are on. How can we fail to be ashamed when a person’s life expectancy depends largely on their postcode
and income, and what their parents did for a living?
There are many incredibly positive things in my constituency, including some of the most improved
schools, which have not only improved opportunity and life chances but played a role in tackling health inequality
and improving wellbeing. I pay tribute to all the health
professionals and community workers in the clinical
commissioning group, including its chair Sam Everington
and others, who have led the way on tackling the public
health challenge, but the reality is that despite all their
work my constituents face massive health inequalities.

With every tube stop between Westminster station
and Whitechapel station, people’s life expectancy goes
down by six months. That is a scandal. Tower Hamlets
has the shortest life expectancy of all London boroughs,
with men living on average five years less than men in
Kensington and Chelsea. We have the 12th highest
prevalence of diagnosed diabetes, major challenges with
obesity among children, and high levels of smoking, HIV, sexually transmitted infections and drug addiction.
Even though many of my constituents abstain from
alcohol, Tower Hamlets unfortunately has the seventh
highest number of people with alcohol dependency.

In 2017, Sir Michael Marmot warned that the historic
rises in life expectancy—the result of centuries of improvements—had ground to a halt. It is almost beyond belief that centuries of progress should end on our watch.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned of some of
the challenges, including around suicide, drug overdose
and alcohol-related liver diseases, which are affecting
middle-aged men throughout England. Given the scale
of the challenge and the dangers of going backwards,
what are Ministers doing about this? We would think
they would be investing in the kinds of programmes
that help to tackle the public health emergency, but
instead we see significant funding cuts, as many Members
have said. In my borough, we have lost £3 million since
2015-16—in one of the areas with the highest levels of
depprivation and child poverty in the country.

We need Government investment to tackle the public
health challenge. Otherwise, all the Government’s investment
in the national health service will be undermined, as
many have pointed out, and the Government will be
missing a trick. We should in this debate be unified on
the need to tackle the public health challenge in all our
constituencies. Ministers talk about cross-party working,
so my appeal to them is that they put that to the test and
put in the investment to support local agencies, local
authorities and health professionals. Let us deal with
this appalling challenge by working together, because it
is desperately needed.

6.37 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland
West) (Lab): I am happy to be closing an excellent debate
on public health in what is, as we have heard, Mental Health
Awareness Week. I thank those who have contributed
to the debate: the hon. Members for Fareham (Suella
Braverman) and for Bury South (Mr Lewis); the right
hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers);
my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South
West (Eleanor Smith); the hon. Members for Chichester
(Gillian Keegan), for Westmorland and Lonsdale
(Tim Farron) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow);
my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston
(Preet Kaur Gill); the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria
 Caulfield); my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham
(Sarah Champion); the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek
Thomas); and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton
South (Dr Williams), whose speech was absolutely excellent
and is the only one I am going to highlight. …

Yes, there is a little bit of favouritism. I also thank the
hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), my hon.
Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton
(Jim McMahon), the hon. Member for Chelmsford
(Vicky Ford), and my hon. Friends the Members for
Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Heywood and
Middleton (Liz McInnes), for York Central (Rachael
Maskell) and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara
Ali). There were a lot of excellent speeches in among all
those.

It has been a passionate debate—with good reason—and
I am pleased to see so many Members who are as
passionate about public health as I am. Let us be clear:
it is not talking down the fabulous work that our NHS
does day in, day out, or the amazing doctors, nurses,
radiographers, clinicians, porters, catering staff, cleaners—
indeed all NHS workers—to say that the health of our
nation is at risk because of this Government’s callous
and careless cuts to public health services. The public
health grant is expected to see a £700 million real-terms
reduction from its 2014-15 level. That includes £85 million
in the current financial year, at a time when the Government
are peddling the phrase “prevention is better than cure”. That phrase means nothing without adequate funding for our public health services.

I therefore ask the Minister, since prevention is a priority for this Government, whether she will commit today to reversing years of public health budget cuts. Public health spending is just a tiny proportion of the overall spend on health in England. It was just 2.8% in 2018-19, and that figure is falling year on year. Because of that, the Association of Directors of Public Health says that reductions in services are now “inevitable”—and that is a direct quote. This is at a time when services are needed more than ever, as we have heard.

Gonorrhoea and syphilis rates are on the rise, rates of smoking among pregnant women have risen for the first time on record, Victorian diseases—scarlet fever, whooping cough, malnutrition and gout—have seen a 52% upturn since 2010, and there has been an increase of more than 3,000 hospital admissions per year: that is all on this Government’s watch. This Government are making our country ill. Local authorities were given the responsibility since 2010, and there has been an increase of more than 3,000 hospital admissions per year: that is all on this Government’s watch. This Government are making our country ill. Local authorities were given the responsibility for public health in 2013, rightly so in my opinion, but without sustainable funding they have buckled under the pressure of austerity. Their ability to maintain and improve the health outcomes of local residents has been jeopardised. Last year, for the first time in over a century, increases in life expectancy stalled, and in some parts of the UK they have even decreased, as we have heard.

The life expectancy gap between women in the most deprived and least deprived areas is 7.4 years. The healthy life expectancy gap between men in the most deprived and least deprived areas is almost two decades. Yes, you heard me right, Mr Speaker—I said two decades. That is 20 years of difference in healthy life. There is a persistent north-south divide in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy, with people residing in southern regions of England on average living longer and with fewer years in poor health than those living further north. As someone from the north, as Members can probably tell, that particularly concerns me.

The Northern Health Science Alliance, or NHSA, set out why that is so important in its “Health for Wealth” report, published last year. I recommend that every Member reads it. Productivity is worse in the north, because health is worse in the north. Improving health in the north of England would therefore lead to substantial economic gains. What will the Minister do to address these regional health inequalities? Obviously, I agree with the notion that prevention is better than cure, but I do not share the Government’s belief that prevention is possible without sustainable funding. If we are to reduce the ever-growing pressure on our NHS, we should therefore be investing in our public health services to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live a healthy life—

[Interruption.] I am pleased that we have been joined by the Secretary of State, and I shall have to try to repeat some of my best lines for him.

Analysis by the British Medical Association shows a continued trend of decreased funding, despite hospital admissions in which obesity, smoking, and alcohol was a factor increasing over a similar time period.

We have an obesity crisis in this country. The UK has one of the worst childhood obesity rates in Europe, but the Government’s childhood obesity plans have failed to seriously tackle this crisis, and with consultations still ongoing we have yet to see any material action by the Government. The UK spends about £6 billion a year on the medical costs of conditions related to being overweight or obese, and a further £10 billion on diabetes, but less than £638 million on obesity prevention programmes. Will the Minister commit to correcting that funding imbalance today?

Smoking remains the No. 1 cause of death in England, yet Action on Smoking and Health, ASH, found that in England from 2014-15 to 2017-18 local authority spending on tobacco control, including stop smoking services, fell by 30%. Furthermore, an annual survey conducted by ASH, commissioned by Cancer Research UK, found that, in 2018, 30 local authorities had no budget for tobacco control activity outside of stop smoking services. Although smoking costs the NHS an estimated £2.5 billion, NICE estimates that for every £1 invested in stop smoking services, £2.37 will be saved on treating smoking-related disease and lost productivity. Will the Minister therefore justify the Government’s reasoning for not investing in stop smoking services?

Alcohol is the leading risk factor for ill health, early mortality and disability among people aged 15 to 49. Even though hospital admissions associated with alcohol have nearly doubled since 2006-07, and have risen tenfold when obesity is also a factor, the budgets for alcohol and obesity services have been cut by more than 10% over the past three years. Does the Minister agree that if there is a need funding should follow? Will she ensure that public health services are funded sufficiently?

Demands on sexual health services have also increased. At a time when sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhoea and syphilis are on the rise, the Government have cut funding for sexual health services by £55.7 million since 2013-14. I welcome the Government’s commitment to end HIV infections in England by 2030, but that progress risks being undone by those cuts. Sexual health services are essential if we are to end new HIV transmissions in the UK, but clinics report that they have to turn people away because of cuts to services. Does the Minister agree with the assessment by the Terrence Higgins Trust?

[Interruption.] If the Minister’s colleagues will allow her to listen to what I am saying, the trust said that “sexual health services are at crisis point”.

The Secretary of State may shake his head as much as he likes, but that is not me saying that—it is the Terrence Higgins Trust.

Finally, I would like to state my disappointment and frustration at the fact that there is no future funding settlement for the local authority public health grant after 2019-20. The Minister will know all too well that time is ticking by, so will she set out the Government’s plans for a funding settlement post 2020? We need a settlement that will ensure that people can access the public health services they need so that they can live healthier and longer lives. I hope that after this debate the Minister will see how important that is to our constituencies and local authorities, which are responsible for this area of work. That is why the Opposition are calling on the Government to publish impact assessments on public health spending cuts and stalling life expectancy.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. This is only her second or third time at the Dispatch Box—it is the first time we have faced each other across the Dispatch Box—and she is still finding her feet, but she will be
keen to make her mark. Now is her chance. I urge her to publish those impact assessments, then do the right thing: properly fund public health now, because people’s lives really do depend on it.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a great pleasure to respond to this important debate, which has covered a wide range of issues, showing the depth of the passion shared by hon. Members across the House for public health.

I want to address some of the points made by hon. Members. I should like to begin with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashworth (Ashworth), opened the debate and began by mentioning towns such as Burnley and Blackpool. I was born in Blackburn, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) referred to. Like him, I am a slightly disappointed Blackburn Rovers fan, and I represent a Lancashire constituency. I share his concerns about health inequalities, which I see in my constituency. That is what motivates me in this job, and it is what motivates my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, which is why she set the ageing society grand challenge. The Government share the commitment to prevention and public health that the debate has highlighted, because the costs, both to individual lives and to the NHS, are simply too great to ignore.

I want to address some of the points that hon. Members have raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) spoke about her local services. I am looking forward to reading the report and wish her well as she becomes a mother.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about local mental health provision and the experience of his young constituent. NHS England’s planned spend on mental health in the year ending 2019 was just over £12 billion. For children’s mental health services, it is nearly £7 billion—an increase of 5.6% on the previous year. I would like to reassure him that we are definitely not aiming for a one-size-fits-all service.

I can reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) that we are absolutely committed to early years provision. He mentioned the importance of research. We are also committed to allied healthcare professionals and working to retain the GPs that we have as well as releasing them to give them more time for frontline care.

In response to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Eleanor Smith), let me say that this Government are absolutely committed to the NHS remaining free at the point of delivery. I would like to put to bed the myth that there is any aim towards privatisation. On the specific constituency case that she raised, I remind her that almost 90% of prescriptions are dispensed free of charge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) spoke with her usual passion. She paid tribute to Dame Marianne Griffiths, and I join her in paying tribute to everyone at Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

I can tell the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that we do take prevention extremely seriously. I know that he and I have a meeting scheduled to discuss healthcare in his constituency. We have published our vision for prevention, setting out how we will put that at the heart of the health and social care system, and later this year, we will launch a Green Paper on prevention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is an assiduous parliamentarian as well as constituency Member of Parliament, talked about screening for bowel cancer—something that has touched her family. The long-term plan will modernise the bowel cancer screening programme to detect more cancers by lowering the starting age from 60 to 50. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) touched on mental health. I would like to reiterate again that that is at the heart of the long-term plan.

I had never noticed my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) being critical, but she is definitely a candid friend to the Government. I thank her for her work as a cancer nurse and for highlighting the improvements in the diagnosis of breast cancer, stroke and other diseases.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) is a great champion for survivors of sexual abuse. I will take away the specific points that she raised and discuss them with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who is responsible for mental health, inequalities and suicide prevention.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), who is also a great champion for the healthcare of his constituents—as I know from the number of letters to him that I sign—spoke about podiatry and the importance of prevention in amputations.

The hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) is obviously, with his background in medicine, extremely passionate about public health. Like him, the Government are committed to early years provision. He mentioned the work that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is doing on this. Yes, there are inequalities in life expectancy, but it is as high as it has ever been in this country.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on the work that she has done on highlighting the issue of menopause, which has not been raised in this Chamber nearly enough. I reiterate to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) that reducing health inequalities remains central to our strategy for public health, and we continue to require councils to use their grant with a view to achieving that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) that we need to resolve the uncertainty about Brexit, and I thank her for highlighting the importance of research.

To the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), all I will say is that the World Health Organisation said that our air quality strategy is an example for the world to follow. To the hon. Member, Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), let me say that we are in no way complacent, and I draw her attention to the targeted lung health checks in Manchester, which are producing excellent results.
To the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), let me say that public health funding for 2020 onwards, including the local authority public health grant, will be considered carefully in the next spending review, in the light of all available evidence. To the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), let me say that we are taking serious steps on obesity. I share the passion of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for improved health outcomes in the north; I represent a seat in the north-west, and she represents one in the north-east.

The most important thing to remember is that public health is about more than the health service and public health grant. It is about the whole of government. It is about more than a single pot of money. Even within local government, improving health is not all about the grant, because local authorities can use the whole range of their activity—including on transport, planning and the economy—to promote better health. Spending across the board in local government, central Government and the economy—to promote better health. Spending across of their activity—including on transport, planning and the economy—to promote better health. Spending across the board in local government, central Government and the NHS can all be far more influential in improving and protecting health.

Equality issues remain central to our strategy for public health. Our overarching twin ambition is to raise healthy life expectancy while reducing the inequalities in life expectancies across different groups of the population. In its long-term plan, the NHS has already committed to strengthening action on prevention and health inequalities. All local health systems will be expected to set out in 2019 how they will reduce health inequalities. This Government’s commitment to improving public health, working with the NHS, local authorities and others, is rock solid. We will set out further steps in the Green Paper, and I urge all Members to oppose the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 230, Noes 286.

Division No. 415] [6.56 pm

**AYES**

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, r Sir Kevin
Beckett, r Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Chris Leslie)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Caddy, Ruth
Campbell, r Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah

Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Eldford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Libby
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, r John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Aftal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian

Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mansden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinney, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moran, Laya
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Tellers for the Ayes:
Liz Twist and
Bambo Charalambous

NOES

Trickett, Jon
Tiggs, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leitwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel

Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
McTaffie, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purcell, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Seuls, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhys
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John

Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Richard
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbourn, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burgart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Gregory
Cardiff, James
Cash, Mr William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinnenage, Caroline
Djajogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysy, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, rh Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) does not need to raise his hand as though he were in a classroom. I can see him clearly; he is unmistakable and we will come to him ere long.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised a point of order yesterday highlighting the fact that the annual report of the learning disabilities mortality review has not been published despite its being handed over by its authors on 1 March and being leaked in The Sunday Times this week. Now we have leaks not only of details from the report about the deaths of people with learning disabilities, but of the full recommendations of the report of the learning disabilities mortality review has not been published despite its being handed over by its authors.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to update the House on 1 March and being leaked in The Sunday Times.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There has been a lot of speculation today about British Steel, which employs 4,000 people in my constituency and across the country. It is a significant business. In the light of that speculation, while I recognise the sensitivities of the situation, have the Government given any notice of an intention to update the House about what is going on?

Mr Speaker: No. I have received no recent indication. If the hon. Gentleman has in mind the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I should, in fairness, say that that right hon. Gentleman is a most solicitous member of the Government. From time to time, as he judges appropriate, he does come to see me to apprise me of matters of which he thinks I need to be aware, sometimes as a prelude to a ministerial statement. In this case, in recent days—that is to say, this week—I have received no such indication. The hon. Gentleman may wish to conduct his own private discussions or make inquiries about Government intentions. He may thereby be satisfied. If he is not, and on a different subject but, in the same way as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), he feels the Chamber has improperly been denied a chance to air the issue, he knows there is a recourse open to him.

Business without Debate

Mr Speaker: Before we come to motions 3 to 5, I should inform the House that I have considered the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 for certification under Standing Order No. 83— I know the House was keenly attentive to the importance of my doing so—and I have decided that no certificate is required.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

Extending the European Union (Agriculture)

That the draft Food and Feed Hygiene and Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 8 April, be approved. —(Jo Churchill.)

Question agreed to.

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

Extending the European Union (Customs)

That the Trade etc. in Dual-Use Items and Firearms etc. (Amendment) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 806), dated 4 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 4 April, be approved. —(Jo Churchill.)

Question agreed to.

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

Extending the European Union (Sanctions)

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 855), dated 10 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 April, be approved. —(Jo Churchill)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 15 May (Standing Order No. 41A).
PETITION

Green Deal Scheme

7.17 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of those who have been adversely impacted by the green deal scheme. The presentation of this petition on behalf of constituents from Greenfield over to Baillieston follows excellent campaign work undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who has been dogged in his pursuit of this issue. Likewise, it follows the outstanding efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who is seeking to progress his Green Deal (Conduct of Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd) Bill. My voice tonight is part of a wider effort by the SNP team at Westminster to seek justice for those constituents unfairly affected by the green deal.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow East

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Glasgow East both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life savings or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they have simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay, are valid without a building warrant.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons

14 MAY 2019

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002452]
the town, which have made people really frightened. A 90-year-old woman told me recently that she had become frightened to leave her home. There are increasing numbers of break-ins and burglaries. Residents describe groups of young people who are being deliberately provocative, throwing stones and driving quad bikes around. Some of that is clearly antisocial behaviour, but some of it crosses the boundary into criminal activity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising an issue which, as he has said, is important not just in his constituency, but in constituencies throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Street pastors have done some incredible work in my constituency. A group of churches have come together to address antisocial issues. Along with Government bodies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, they have managed to reduce antisocial behaviour. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best way of reducing crime and antisocial behaviour is to provide alternatives for young people, and that that means funding the churches and voluntary bodies which provide schemes and places for those young people to go, as well as relationships to discourage destructive behaviour?

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. Of course there is not just a criminal justice response to crime and antisocial behaviour. Many people, including those in voluntary and community sector organisations and schools, are working to build the capacity of our communities. However, there is also a need for an adequate police response.

In Ingleby Barwick, a great deal of attention has been paid to antisocial behaviour. Again, there have been attacks on individuals. People shopping at the local branch of Tesco have been subjected to unacceptable levels of intimidation and abuse. I recently met the Low Hartburn residents group. People are so concerned about the rising levels of property theft in that area that a group of concerned residents—who stress that they are not vigilantes—have formed a strong residents group.

They organise activities such as playdays and community capacity-building, but they also have a rota, taking it in turns to patrol their estate at night. These are hard-working people who have jobs during the day. They are not doing this off their own bat—they are working with the police, and are taking plenty of necessary precautions—but they are having to enhance the community’s response by organising their own street patrols.

In Parkfield and Oxbridge, I have heard testimony from the excellent local councillors, including Louise Baldock. She has told me about intolerable levels of antisocial behaviour. People have referred to a lot of abuse in the streets, many residents are worried about the high level of drug dealing in the streets, and there is street sex work. Even in the more affluent area of Hartburn, where I spent time with residents on Friday, there are high levels of car crime and shoplifting. I am sure that all that is being echoed in many other areas in Stockton South.

What I have related so far is a series of anecdotes, but the data is quite shocking. I asked the House of Commons Library about the figures for reported crime. I know that it has increased throughout the country—there has been a 31% increase throughout England and Wales, although that may be due partly to increases in crime and partly to better reporting—but in Cleveland there has been a 55% increase, and in my constituency there was an 83% increase between 2011-12 and 2018-19. The perceptions of people on the street are clearly borne out by that data. That may be because there are some unique problems in Cleveland. We have the highest level of reported antisocial behaviour in the country, the second highest levels of domestic violence and the highest levels of drug abuse. We are an area of very high deprivation and have some serious and organised criminals involved in the supply of drugs. There are some serious urban problems in our area and a serious response is required, but in the period since 2011-12 there has been not just a real-terms cut, but a cash-terms reduction. Cleveland police force is £34 million worse off, and that is including a slight increase in funding last year, although for the area with the fourth highest reported crime rate in the country we had the second lowest level of increased funding. Since 2011-12 there has been a cash-terms reduction of £17 million in our area.

That has meant that in a time of increased crime—an 83% increase—our police numbers have been slashed from 1,700 to 1,200; there are 500 fewer police and 50 fewer police community support officers.

Unfortunately, we have had several chief constables. One retired, one suddenly left, and we now have a brilliant new chief constable in Richard Lewis. I have listened to all of them and they have said that uniquely in Cleveland—many of them have worked in other parts of the country—the police just do not have the resources to respond to the levels of demand.

Alex Cunningham: We are very proud in Cleveland of the partnership work between the local authorities, voluntary organisations and others and our communities in trying to deal with some of the issues, but of course they need resources. We have seen tremendously large cuts to local authority funding in our area—50% in Stockton’s case—and I know that my hon. Friend understands why our constituents are feeling so angry and frustrated when they do not see the action that they need in our communities.

Dr Williams: Again, my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. We are seeing a great response from the local authority antisocial behaviour teams, but they tell us that they just do not have the resources they need to deal with this significant increase in crime and antisocial behaviour in our area.

I did not initially want to air some of this in public. One of the reasons why we wrote to the Home Secretary privately is that—I hope the Minister understands this—there is a genuine concern about keeping confidence in the police locally. I do not want to undermine public confidence in the ability of the police to do their job, but when the police are telling me that they do not have enough officers to police our area safely, and when we approach the Home Secretary privately to try to get a response and do not get one, I am afraid that there is no other way open to MPs than to air some of these problems in a public forum.

I want to compare Cleveland to some other areas. Nationally, police forces are funded at an average level of about £2,400 per crime; in Cleveland we get £2,140. Let us compare areas of similar sizes. Some might say that Cleveland is an area with a particularly small
population and that therefore it will not be funded at the levels of other areas, but Warwickshire is a similar size force and it gets £2,494 per crime as opposed to our £2,140. Let us compare areas with similar budgets. Gwent has a similar budget to the Cleveland force. It has to contend with 54,784 crimes a year and we have 61,982, so we have more crimes for a similar budget. Whichever way we cut the numbers, I believe the chief constable and the police when they say that they just do not have the resources to do the job that they need to do.

We have levels of crime that are 21% higher than the national average and that figure is rising, but even with the recent very small increases in funding—according to the House of Commons Library there has been a 3% increase in funding in real terms nationally—there is a 0% increase in Cleveland. Local people just do not understand why we are not getting the resources. There must be something wrong with the formula.

I have challenged the police and asked them what they are doing to reform. I have asked them what they could do to use their money in a better way. They have given me a long list of things that they are trying to do better. They have put extra resources into the force control room to try to get more timely responses; they have tried to get more police on to the frontline; they have tried to improve the levels of community policing and intelligence; they are trying to use technology; and they are trying to have a named police community support officer for every council ward. They are also conscious of the fact that, because of the rising levels of crime and the rising pressure on the police, their levels of sickness are very high. Around 100 of the 1,200 officers are off on long-term sick leave at the moment, which brings extra pressure.

The force is in a spiral of increasing problems but, despite that, all the police I meet are doing a remarkable job. Despite the historical problems with Cleveland police, there are high levels of trust in the police among the community. The individual police I meet are doing a brilliant job. I have to pay particular tribute to our Labour police and crime commissioner, Barry Coppinger, whose levels of engagement are phenomenal. He has attended hundreds of public meetings and gatherings and is a fine spokesman for the work of his team. He is doing the very best he can with the resources that he has.

I am afraid that I have to be a bit party political about this as well. We have a Tory Tees Valley Mayor. Oversight of the police is not the responsibility of the combined authority, but our Tory Tees Valley Mayor has taken it upon himself to make public pronouncements about Cleveland police, and his response to the woefully inadequate funding and the rising levels of need in the community has been to suggest that we abolish Cleveland police. That shows that he is really not listening to our communities. Our neighbouring forces in Durham and North Yorkshire have to contend largely with rural crime, but we have unique levels of urban crime, including serious organised crime, and our police have developed a unique level of expertise. It is clear to me that any kind of abolition or merger would split my constituency in two, with one half being policed by one force and the other half being policed by another. It would completely dilute the police’s effectiveness. Such a split would also mask the fundamental unfairness of the funding. Taking away the expertise of Cleveland police by following the Tory Tees Valley Mayor’s suggestion of abolition would be a criminals’ wet dream on Teesside. It would dilute the police’s effectiveness and be entirely the wrong strategic response.

What would we like to see happening? We wrote to the Home Secretary to outline the rising levels of crime, the rising demands on the police, the increases in sexual offences and in children missing from home, and the massive increase in homicides, in the levels of domestic abuse and in the number of robberies. We know that this is not just about a criminal justice response, however. Indeed, there are some brilliant organisations working in my constituency to provide a community response. A lot of young people there have a very difficult start in life. Many of them are in households where they are exposed to adverse childhood experiences, including parental mental health problems, domestic violence and substance misuse. We have to invest in those young people and I try to bring representatives of the organisations making that investment to every public meeting that I go to. I must give a real shout-out to Nicola Garrett and Darren Iveson from the Five Lamps organisation in Thornaby, and to the Corner House Youth Project, which works across into the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and does brilliant, sterling work helping vulnerable young people to find alternatives to crime. The work that our schools do is fantastic as well. There are many other organisations working hard in our community.

However, we have to face the facts here. The biggest problems felt by our communities are the lack of an adequate police presence, the fact that the police are not there to gather the intelligence that they used to and that the police response is not sufficient. I have challenged and listened to the police on that. I do not think that any force in the country would be able to deal with a 55% increase in crime over the past eight years—the statistic for Stockton South is 83%—given the massive cuts that Cleveland police have faced, which have led to the loss of 500 police officers and 50 PCSOs. Beyond anything else, I as the local representative of my community and the other Members of Parliament in the Tees Valley, particularly Labour Members, are asking the Government to consider the particular local issues and to see whether the police funding formula is the right one to deliver sufficient resources to help my constituents and my community to feel safe.

7.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) for securing this important debate—his first Adjournment debate. I am grateful to him for his points, particularly the one about his letter to the Home Secretary. I am not aware of that letter, but I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would expect me to be, given the number of letters that the Home Office receives weekly, let alone annually. However, should he ever have a similar communication in future, he should feel free to raise the matter directly with me and I will endeavour to ensure that he gets a response. We will look into the matter and I am sure that we will respond.
Alex Cunningham: I thank the Minister for giving way and for her warm words about her responding to letters, but will she do us a wey favour, go and bang on the Home Secretary’s door tomorrow and ask, “Did you get this letter? Did you get the two or three reminders that were sent? Will you now respond?”

Victoria Atkins: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, he would have heard me say that officials and I will look into the matter because we want to ensure that colleagues’ letters receive a response.

The hon. Member for Stockton South made many points, but I will first refer to the overall national picture of crime. The independent Office for National Statistics is clear that the likelihood of being a victim of crime remains low, but we are not complacent. We know that there has been a genuine increase in serious violent crimes, and a recent YouGov poll showed that crime was a more important issue to the public than health for the first time. We are determined to tackle all forms of crime and we are taking decisive action in a number of areas.

The hon. Gentleman made particular reference to serious violence. The measures that we are taking include £17.7 million for 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners under the early intervention youth fund—part of the £22 million that has been committed overall—and a new £3.6 million national county lines co-ordination centre led by the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the National Crime Agency, which launched last September. In the few months that the centre has been operating, it has seen more than 1,000 arrests and over 1,300 vulnerable people safeguarded, which perhaps underlines the fact that many of the crimes that the police now have to deal with involve not only criminality, with serious organised crime gangs and so on, but the manipulation of vulnerable people. Tackling that forms part of our approach under the serious violence strategy.

The Government are also investing in a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media, which is a new, 21st-century methodology that gangs are using, and we are in the middle of strengthening legislation on firearms, knives and corrosive substances through the Offensive Weapons Bill, which I hope will receive Royal Assent this week. We are also launching a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence.

I would not want anyone to think that the Home Office does not take the concerns of the north-east seriously when it comes to crime. I was in Darlington last week at a serious violence engagement event for the north-east. I spoke to a hall full of local people from all manner of agencies—education, healthcare, local government, trading standards and so on, as well as the police—about what we can do locally to ensure that the approach to tackling serious violence is as co-ordinated and effective as possible.

I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that Cleveland is also receiving more than £546,000 through the early intervention youth fund to support the development of early intervention programmes aimed at young people at risk of engaging in criminality, including serious violence and knife crime. We are also taking action to address the drivers of such crime. For example, we recognise the devastating impact that illicit drugs can have on individuals and communities, which is why the Home Secretary has commissioned an independent review of drugs, in which Professor Dame Carol Black is looking at drug use in the 21st century and the ways in which drugs are fuelling, for example, serious violence. We look forward to the review’s initial findings in the summer.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned antisocial behaviour and described its wearing effect on local communities. We recognise the impact it can have on people and communities and on people’s enjoyment of their communities. We reformed the tools and powers available to local areas to tackle antisocial behaviour through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Those tools and powers are designed to enable local agencies to respond to such behaviours, to stop them escalating and to prevent them from reoccurring.

Both the police and, on some occasions, local councils can use a range of powers to help members of the public with antisocial behaviour. They include court orders to stop the behaviour of the most destructive people, powers to close premises that are causing nuisance or disorder, and powers to stop antisocial behaviour in public places. The community trigger and other measures enable the public to feed back to the police and the local council when they think antisocial behaviour is not being dealt with as they would like.

We have published statutory guidance on this to help local areas, and we have updated it to reflect feedback from professionals and to remind them of the importance of proportionality and transparency in the use of some of these powers, which are very varied. These are strong powers that can be used, and we keep them under review through a national strategic board that brings together representatives from key agencies and from across Government to consider our approach and to identify any developing issues.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned police funding and—I almost hesitate, because I know hon. Members know this—I will give a little history lesson on why very difficult decisions had to be made at the beginning of this decade. We inherited a terrible economic mess and had to make very difficult decisions not just in policing but in a number of areas to live within our means and to try to repair some of the damage. It is precisely because of that stewardship that we are now in a better position financially and we are able to increase police funding, as we did last year, thus ensuring, with the help of police and crime commissioners, that there is more money for local police forces, counter-terrorism and those officers who tackle serious and organised crime. Nationally, funding will increase by more than £1 billion in 2019-20, including, as I say, with the help of council tax, extra funding for pensions costs and the serious violence fund announced by the Chancellor in the spring statement. Interestingly, this funding is already enabling the police to recruit to fill key gaps and to meet the financial pressures they face next year.

Cleveland police will receive an increase of £7.3 million next year, to a total figure of £132.7 million. That is an increase of nearly 6%. It is a shame the hon. Gentleman did not feel able to support the Government giving that increase of nearly 6%. It is a shame the hon. Gentleman did not feel able to support the Government giving that increase of nearly 6%.
I note the time. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Stockton South has been able to secure this debate. I very much look forward to discussing this with him further.
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Policing

1. Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of changes to the policing budget since 2015 on the operational effectiveness of Welsh police forces. [910816]

2. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of changes to the policing budget since 2015 on the operational effectiveness of Welsh police forces. [910817]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We have been clear that ensuring that the police have the right resources and powers is a Government priority, which is why we are providing more than £1 billion of additional funding to the police in 2019-20, including precept, and additional funding for serious violence. Funding to the Welsh forces will increase by more than £43 million in 2019-20 compared with 2018-19.

Susan Elan Jones: I welcome the Minister to his place, but I wish he would not just regurgitate Tory twaddle. When the National Audit Office makes it clear that central Government funding to police has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010-11, and when the cross-party Home Affairs Committee makes it clear that the funding structure is not fit for purpose, can we have some action? Can we have some standing up for Wales instead of the vacuous nonsense we get from this Tory Government?

Kevin Foster: It has to be said that anyone who wants to hear vacuous nonsense can just listen to those sort of attacks in the Chamber. Let us be clear: in 2015-16, the combined budget for North Wales police was £139.8 million; in 2019-20, it will be £115.8 million. That shows the increase in funding that is going on. Three out of the four forces in Wales are rated good for effectiveness, which is the subject of the main question.³

Carolyn Harris: South Wales police are dealing with nearly 50% of all crimes reported in Wales in an environment of increased domestic violence, knife crime, serious crime and terrorism. Meanwhile, they face a greatly reduced budget and the loss of nearly 1,000 staff. South Wales police are doing a good job; when will the Government give them the resources and the support they need?

Kevin Foster: The Government recognise the pressures, for example, in the recent announcement of additional knife crime funding. South Wales police will receive £1.2 million. In 2015-16, South Wales police had a budget of £255.1 million; in 2019-20, its budget will be £290.3 million.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in commending Welsh police officers for some of their recent successes in bearing down on county lines drug operations, which increasingly target rural areas? We welcome the additional money that was announced last week for South Wales police, but does the Minister agree that all police forces in Wales, including my own force, Dyfed-Powys police, deserve extra resources to tackle this evil trade?

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend perfectly highlights the fact that crime does not stop at political borders. Criminals and gangs in England target victims in north Wales, south Wales and in his constituency. It is a priority and there has been a focus on tackling county lines. That shows the importance of working together across political boundaries to tackle a crime that all our constituents are concerned about.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Dyfed-Powys police and Gwent police work closely with West Mercia police on county lines issues, drug running and child trafficking. What is the Government’s view of the comments of Lynne Owens, director general of the National Crime Agency, that more funding is required for county lines issues?

Kevin Foster: I praise West Mercia police for their work to help tackle cross-border crime, particularly around county lines. The Government will always look to provide the powers and resources that the police need to tackle that, but it is also vital that we have joined-up working. It is also right that, as was touched on in the comments, we look to tackle the kingpins of those organisations, not just the street dealers, who we can see most easily.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If Welsh policing was devolved as is the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland, there would be a £20 million windfall for Welsh policing. Does it not show how bad the England and Wales grant system is that we were better off under the Barnett formula? Is it not time that the British Government dropped their ideological obsession against devolving policing to Wales?

Kevin Foster: I do not recognise the figures that have just been used. As we touched on in answers to two previous questions, crime does not stop at political boundaries. Criminal gangs in the north-west of England target victims in north Wales as much as victims within England. The real political obsession is that of Plaid, which wants to determine things on political boundaries, not on how communities and criminals work.

EU Withdrawal: Welsh Economy

3. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the proposed withdrawal agreement with the EU.

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** The withdrawal agreement means we can leave the European Union with a deal that honours the referendum result, protects our economy and security and safeguards our Union. The best outcome for Wales and the Welsh economy is for the UK to leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly way.

**Jeff Smith:** What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of non-tariff barriers? They would result in customs procedures and technical barriers to trade, meaning delays and costs that would be particularly damaging to the Welsh economy.

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that further underlines why the deal we have negotiated with the European Union will work in the interests of Welsh manufacturers, Welsh agriculture and other sectors across the whole UK. The political declaration says “as frictionless as possible,” which is the objective we want to achieve.

**Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The economy of Montgomeryshire is very dependent on the sheepmeat industry. Does the Secretary of State accept that retaining tariff-free access to the EU market is crucial to the future of all of rural Wales where sheepmeat is important? Will he do everything he can, alongside me and many others, to ensure that the withdrawal agreement is passed when it returns to the House?

**Alun Cairns:** My hon. Friend speaks with great authority and expertise, and he has been an extremely strong advocate for rural Wales in all the roles he has conducted, be it on the Development Board for Rural Wales, as an Assembly Member or, now, as a Member of Parliament. He is right about the withdrawal agreement and the support it has received both from the Welsh farming unions and from farmers directly because it will give them access to the European market and will allow them the freedoms that being an independent trading nation delivers, as well as stopping freedom of movement.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Some 12,000 jobs in the Welsh economy rely on steel. Given the crisis in this sector, how will the right hon. Gentleman work with the Business Secretary to get the steel sector deal over the line?

**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for raising this important point. I spoke to a director of Tata earlier this week and, along with a Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I will be meeting him next week. This is an important sector of the economy, not only for south Wales but for north Wales and the rest of the UK. The sector is of strategic importance, and we are determined to work to secure a steel sector deal that offers a long-term future.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Given that the Wales Office has no exclusive responsibility for any of the 300-odd work streams associated with Brexit and that we have had 20 years of devolution under a Welsh Government who have legislative and taxation powers, can the Secretary of State give the House a necessarily brief definition of his role and function?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting question. Of course the cross-Government responsibilities in which the Wales Office is active and interested go far and wide. I happily point to the crossings and the Severn toll as one example. Wales is also the only part of the UK to have a city and growth deal in every area.

**Hywel Williams:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer but, just for starters: electrification of the railway west of Cardiff, abandoned; electrification of the north Wales line, a pipe dream; the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, cancelled; the post-Brexit shared prosperity fund, handed to an England-only Department; and, as I said, the Wales Office has no exclusive Brexit responsibilities. Is not his function just to nod through Conservative policies, whatever the cost to Wales?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman should be practical and realistic in what he calls for. He will be fully aware that electrification of the railway to Swansea offers no tangible benefits to passengers. He will also be aware that the Public Accounts Committee called for re-analysis of each section of the electrification, and it was on that basis that we came to the same outcome by delivering the most modern trains, which happen to be hybrid. Is he seeking to support a tidal lagoon that would be three times the cost of an alternative green provider?

Industrial Strategy

4. **Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) Welsh Government Ministers on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) Welsh Government Ministers on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy.

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** I have been working closely both with Cabinet colleagues and with the Welsh Government to ensure that Wales benefits from the industrial strategy. We have already delivered a number of projects in Wales, with Wales receiving £90 million from the industrial strategy challenge fund.

**Mark Tami:** What is the Secretary of State’s Department doing to ensure that the north Wales growth deal actually happens, that the Heathrow logistics hub goes to Shotton and that more Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises work with our defence companies, such as Raytheon? He needs to get a grip on his Department—we have had more junior Wales Ministers than you could wave a stick at.

**Alun Cairns:** There have been countless engagements with local authority leaders across north Wales, and the growth deal is an important project. The hon. Gentleman...
will be aware that, at the last Budget, we committed to funding for that scheme. It is a great example of where the Welsh Government, the UK Government and local authorities are working together. We are optimistic about signing and supporting a number of projects in the near future, but this is of course locally driven, and we are responsive to the demands and the drive of local authorities.

Albert Owen: The Secretary of State will be aware of the negative impact that proposed factory closures and the suspension of major projects has had on my constituency and on north-west Wales. Unemployment is already rising in my constituency, so we need an action plan. What positive steps can the industrial strategy put in place now, and what is the role of the Wales Office in delivering that action plan?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to the unemployment data, but I would also point to employment rates. Identifying individual months will clearly offer one picture, but I think he would recognise the record numbers of people in work and the trend in falling unemployment, irrespective of what happened last month.

On the industrial strategy, I would point to the thermal hydraulics facility in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, which will be world leading. That is just one tangible example, in addition to the active investments we are pursuing elsewhere in the marine environment.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on any progress that has been made on the mid Wales growth deal?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the excellent work he is doing in supporting the mid Wales growth deal. The leader of Powys council was in Westminster last week, and I know she has met my hon. Friend. They have been key in co-ordinating and driving some of the themes that are developing from the deal. It is an exciting prospect, and they are working with Ceredigion council and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who has shown similar enthusiasm.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): A number of my constituents have set up companies in Cheshire that actually operate in Wales. What research and development grants have there been that benefit companies operating in Wales?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important question. I highlighted earlier the £90 million from the strength in places fund that had been made available to the UK’s industrial strategy, making Wales fourth in the UK for the value of grants it receives. That works, absolutely as my hon. Friend. Friend highlights, on a cross-border basis, and the industrial strategy deliberately talks about cross-border growth corridors.

Swansea? What projects has he actually secured to provide procurement opportunities to Welsh steel producers?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to prospects that the tidal lagoon may have provided, but when we analyse the data, it shows that demand from the tidal lagoon would lead to less than a month’s output of steel, so I would suggest that he really look closely at the numbers. Was he advocating supporting a project that is three times more expensive than an alternative? The steel producers in his constituency would be extremely excited to get the go-ahead for the M4 relief road around Wales. The money is available and the planning recommendations are in favour—all we need is a decision from the Welsh Government.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The UK steel industry is undoubtedly a key part of the industrial strategy, but what benefit will the strategy bring specifically for Welsh steel making, which is important for my constituency, given that coil from Port Talbot is fundamental to tube production?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is a strong champion of the steel industry. He recognises how the investments in his constituency will also be important to the investments taking place in south Wales. There has been renewal of the blast furnaces in south Wales, and we are working hard to secure a steel sector deal. Those things will support the industry in north Wales and south Wales, as well as in Corby and elsewhere across the UK.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Wales is ideally placed to develop pioneering renewable energy projects, especially in wave, tidal and hydro, and that could make an invaluable contribution to achieving net-zero carbon emissions. Will the Secretary of State assure us that Wales will receive sufficient support from the industrial strategy, and in particular the £2.5 billion clean growth fund, to realise its potential, and that Wales will not be left to rue missed opportunities yet again?

Alun Cairns: I have already pointed out that Wales is fourth out of any UK nation or region in terms of being successful in gaining grants from the industrial strategy challenge fund. Swansea University’s project for the active home is world-leading, using the latest materials to develop energy-positive properties, and just down the road from the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is Pembroke Dock marina. These are exciting areas of policy from which his constituency can develop and take opportunities.

Shared Prosperity Fund

5. Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund.

[910820]

11. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund.

[910827]

14. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. [910830]
The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular discussions with the Welsh Government on a range of issues, including the UK shared prosperity fund. Officials have also already held useful preliminary discussions with their Welsh Government counterparts, and they will of course continue.

Owen Smith: A lot of people in Wales are worried that the shared prosperity fund is just a sneaky Tory plot to steal back a measure of devolution and cut our funds again. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that that is not true? Will he start by telling us whether we will get £370 million in the first year of the shared prosperity fund?

Alun Cairns: Ensuring that all parts of Wales benefit from the UK shared prosperity fund is central to our approach. I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees with stakeholders throughout Wales, be they from businesses or local authorities, that there is a better way to deliver regional support than following the current model, which comes from the European Union. The hon. Gentleman seeks to tempt me to pre-empt the comprehensive spending review, which will of course talk about the quantum of the sum available.

Mr Sweeney: The Secretary of State will be well aware that the £1.3 billion a year from EU structural funds is vital to economies such as those in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the north of England. There is no clarity about what the replacement, the shared prosperity fund, is going to look like, and there has been no consultation whatsoever. Why has there been such a delay in the consultation, which was meant to happen last year?

Alun Cairns: Similarly, I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that there is a better way of delivering regional support. Wales has received £4 billion over 17 years. We will consult shortly, but even ahead of that formal consultation lots of preliminary work is ongoing. For example, the Welsh Government and the UK Government were recently at St Asaph, where the Welsh Government jointly presented. That demonstrates the joint work that is taking place.

Chris Bryant: The Government are talking about awarding the money in Wales on the basis of a competition between different local authorities and areas. Can the Secretary of State quash that rumour? All the money will inevitably end up going to middle-class areas rather than to the areas of greatest need, such as the Rhondda. What is wrong with the fundamental principle of “From each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her need”?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is pre-empting the consultation. We will of course work with local authorities, and there are different views among local authorities throughout Wales on how we deliver the UK shared prosperity fund. The hon. Gentleman’s local authority will have some frustrations as well as some successes in relation to the current European structural funds model, on which we have an opportunity to improve.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK shared prosperity fund will mean that Wales will not lose a penny as a result of leaving the European Union? Will he also confirm that the funding could be used for projects such as the much needed Chepstow bypass?

Alun Cairns: The Chepstow bypass is of course a joint responsibility, but there is no doubt that my hon. Friend has campaigned vociferously for it for some time. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales visited the area within days of becoming a Minister, to work with my hon. Friend. I am determined to do everything necessary to ensure that we can deliver on that, but of course we need the Welsh Government to act as well and highlight it as one of their priorities.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The shared prosperity fund represents a huge opportunity for north Wales. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in designing the fund he will liaise closely with north Wales local authorities, and that he will urge his colleagues in the Treasury to avoid the temptation of simply passing it down to the black hole in Cardiff?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. We are of course already liaising with stakeholders in Wales, and with local authorities in particular. There is a range of views among local authorities on how we should deliver the UK shared prosperity fund. I do not want to pre-empt the consultation, and we will of course consider all the relevant matters. My right hon. Friend and I will want to deliver a scheme that serves all parts of Wales. That is central to our policy to ensure that every part equally can win some investment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Much to do and very little time in which to do it.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the new Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his place and inquire whether he is on a temporary or permanent contract?

Our manifesto for the European elections states: “Under Labour, no region or nation would lose out on funding, and power over decisions affecting investment will be taken in Scotland, Wales and in English regions.” Will the Secretary of State tell us what his party’s European election manifesto says about EU funding in Wales post Brexit?

Alun Cairns: I do not need to read any manifesto because I can repeat what I and the Chancellor have said previously. We have already committed to fund any project that has been agreed before our departure from the European Union, even when the funding date falls beyond that point.

Christina Rees: I am still not sure whether the Secretary of State has a manifesto. If he has one, it is incredibly well hidden. I could not find it. It is as well hidden as the UK shared prosperity consultation, which should have started before Christmas—where is it? Will he commit here and now to the principle of not a penny less, not a power lost for the people of Wales, and will he do his job for once and stand up for the people of Wales?
Alun Cairns: I will ensure that Wales receives its fair share. Let me point to the record of the hon. Lady’s party in government and my party’s record in government. As a result of the new fair funding settlement, Wales receives £120 for every £100 spent in England, far in excess of anything that her party ever did.

**Devolution: Welfare**

6. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of devolving the administration of welfare to the Welsh Government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): The Silk commission’s analysis in 2014 concluded that social security, including welfare, should remain non-devolved. This recommendation had cross-party support when it was considered under the St David’s Day process.

Tommy Sheppard: Does the experience in Scotland, where even a limited devolution of social security powers has allowed the Scottish Government to mitigate the worst excesses of Tory austerity and reduce rates of absolute child poverty, show that devolution works, and is it not time to allow the Welsh Government to design a social security system that fits the character and the aspirations of the people of Wales?

Kevin Foster: I must say that those who look at the social security system and at devolution in Scotland may draw a different picture from that being presented by our separatist colleagues. The reality is that there were a number of powers devolved in the Scotland Act 2016 that their party in Holyrood has decided not to use. I am afraid that those looking at Scotland will come to a very different conclusion from the one that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): May I start by welcoming my hon. Friend to his place? As and when welfare powers are devolved, does he agree that it is important that we have devolved Administrations continuing to work with the Department for Work and Pensions to benefit those who most need support, rather than political posturing by those interested in breaking up the United Kingdom?

Kevin Foster: As always, my hon. Friend is right to say that it is time that the SNP-run Government in Holyrood focused more on the job of actually governing than on trying to build constitutional grievances. Yes, it is right that the DWP continues to work with all stakeholders across our United Kingdom to ensure that we provide the support that is needed as part of our welfare system.

**Pension Credit**

7. Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of pension credit take-up in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her seat and to her first Wales questions. I am sure that she will be as strong an advocate for her constituents as her predecessor, who was a much valued Member of this place.

The Government are committed to ensuring economic security for people at every stage of their life, including when they reach retirement. There were more than 100,000 claimants in Wales in receipt of pension credit in August 2018.

Ruth Jones: The Older People’s Commissioner for Wales has found that £170 million of pension credit went unclaimed in 2016-17. This is a massive amount of money that could make a real difference to some of the poorest people in Wales. We know that pensioners in Wales are not taking up pension credit, but how are the Government monitoring this to note any recognisable trends, and what are they doing to ensure that pensioners in Wales receive the money that is rightfully theirs?

Kevin Foster: I would be concerned to hear of any person not getting the support that this Parliament has voted for them to have. We are engaging with people who may be eligible for these benefits at pivotal stages, such as when they claim state pension or report a change in their circumstances. We are also looking to work with stakeholders such as Independent Age and Age UK to discuss pension credit take-up across Great Britain. I encourage Members of Parliament to play a role in their constituencies.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Some 120,000 pensioners in Wales live in poverty. Today the Government have worsened their financial position with changes to pension credit for mixed-age couples, which will leave some married pensioners worse off by up to £7,000 a year. Will the Secretary of State meet the shadow Wales team, Citizens Advice Wales and pensioner organisations to listen to the just concerns and grievances of elderly citizens who have paid into the system their entire lives and now feel betrayed and left behind by this Government?

Kevin Foster: I suppose it is somewhat apt that a question on mixed-age couples comes to me—for those who know my own background. This is about balancing fairness between the taxpayers who pay for the pension system and welfare system, and those who need to benefit from it, and we do not believe that this change is unfair. However, we do need to ensure that those who are entitled to pension credit take it up and receive it. I am always happy to meet people to discuss how we can do that.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Some 120,000 pensioners in Wales lose out as a result of the Tory Government’s hospital pass to the BBC to take away pensioners’ TV licences?

Kevin Foster: The BBC has a strong and good settlement that it actually agreed. When it was last agreed, that settlement included the responsibility for this benefit.
Mr Speaker: Colleagues, today Ms Gladys Kokorwe, the Speaker of the Botswanan Parliament, is visiting the House. Indeed, she is with us for the rest of the week, accompanied by a team of colleagues. Madam Speaker, we warmly welcome you to our Parliament; we value our relations with you and your country.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910901] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 15 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): May I start by thanking the Mental Health Foundation for organising this year’s Mental Health Awareness Week? Having good mental health is vital to us all, which is why we are investing record levels in mental health. We want to ensure that people receive treatment and care when they need it.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will today be joining world leaders and internet companies for a summit in Paris on tackling terrorist use of the internet.

Alan Brown: I also support Mental Health Awareness Week.

Instead of a transplant providing my constituent Pauline Hunt with an improved and extended life, she has tragically received a death sentence after receiving a malignant kidney. Pauline rightly needs answers, and comfort that this will not happen to anyone else. Rather than her having to fight the system to get these answers, will the Prime Minister ensure that NHS Blood and Transplant undertakes a case review to identify why this malignancy was not picked up earlier and why red flags were not identified post-operation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has clearly raised a very concerning case, and has given some details here on the Floor of the House. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks at the issue, because it is something that they believe is going to give them their comfort that this will not happen to anyone else. Rather than her having to fight the system to get these answers, the Prime Minister has often spoken about how important it is to ensure that everyone gets a fair chance in life, which is why we are investing record levels in mental health.

Q3. [910903] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Prime Minister has often spoken about how important it is to ensure that everyone gets a fair chance in life, which is why we are investing record levels in mental health. The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, because we obviously recognise the importance of supporting young carers. We have published a cross-Government carers action plan that is committing to improve the identification of young carers’ educational opportunities and outcomes, as well as access to support and services. I am very happy to join him in congratulating Annette on this award and thanking her for the amazing work she has done and continues to do to support young carers. I also congratulate Rugby FM on identifying people in the community like Annette who are doing so much help the lives of others.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in acknowledging Mental Health Awareness Week. I want to send my support to all those campaigning all across the country to raise awareness of mental health, and a message that all of us can do something about it by reaching out and talking to people going through a mental health crisis, and also ensuring that there is proper funding for our mental health services.

I would like to pay tribute to the former Labour MP for Birmingham, All Saints, Brian Walden, who passed away this week. He was a very formidable figure in this House and a very strong political interviewer who every politician really loved being interviewed by at the time—but they only said that afterwards.

I think it would also be only right that the House of Commons pays tribute to a leading Hollywood icon and campaigner for animal welfare, Doris Day, who passed away this week. He was a very formidable figure in this House and a very strong political interviewer who every politician really loved being interviewed by at the time—but they only said that afterwards.

Speaking of icons, it would be right to acknowledge that it is 40 years since my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) were both elected to this Parliament for the first time in the 1979 election.

In the last two years, nine of the UK’s richest hedge fund tycoons have donated £2.9 million to the Conservative party. Is this a Government for the many or one in the pockets of an elite few?

The Prime Minister: Let me first respond to some of the tributes that the right hon. Gentleman paid. I am sure that everybody across the House would wish to recognise the sad passing of somebody who gave many hours of entertainment through her films and career—Doris Day.

I would also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on having been elected to this House 40 years ago and having spent 40 years in this House. I also note that 40 years ago, of course, it was the election of Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Government. It was always said that Margaret Thatcher had enjoyed being interviewed by Brian Walden, who did indeed not only have a career in this House but went on to have a very respected career in television journalism as a broadcaster and interviewer.

The right hon. Gentleman raises issues about fairness and equality, and those who are better off in our society. Can I just say to him that income inequality is
down since 2010? As Conservatives, we want everyone to be better off, everyone to have good jobs, and everyone to have a better life. But that is always the difference between us and Labour. Labour wants to bring people down; we want to raise people up.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The Nobel prize-winning economist Sir Angus Deaton said that the UK risks having extreme inequality levels of pay, wealth and health. Of the G7 countries, only the United States is more unequal than the UK. Is that something the Prime Minister is proud of?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about income inequality and fairness. As I say, income inequality is down since 2010. The lowest paid have seen their wages grow the fastest since 2015. The top 1% are contributing more income tax than at any point under the last Labour Government, and thanks to the Conservatives, millions of the lowest paid are no longer paying any income tax at all. That is Conservatives delivering for everyone.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Real wages are lower than they were 10 years ago. How can it be fair that we live in a society where the average chief executive of a FTSE 100 company now earns 145 times the annual average salary in this country? Some of the lowest rates of pay are among young workers. That is why at the weekend, I announced that the next Labour Government will abolish the youth rates, because, quite simply, if you are old enough to do the job, you are old enough to be paid the wage to do the job. Does the Prime Minister agree with that principle?

**The Prime Minister:** The impact of the policy that the right hon. Gentleman has announced is actually that it will cost young people jobs. That is not just what I am saying. The director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that the policy would “end up having quite a negative effect on young people.” But we do not need to rely on quotes to know what would happen to young people under a policy like that. We can just look at the record of the last Labour Government on youth employment. Under the last Labour Government, youth unemployment rose by 44%. Under the Conservatives in government, youth unemployment has fallen by 50%.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I seem to recall that it was the Conservative party that opposed the national minimum wage in 1997. I seem to recall that it was the Conservative party that predicted millions of jobs being lost because we wanted decent pay for people.

Why do this Government continue to punish our young people? Since 2010—\[Interuption.\] Well, since 2010, the Conservative party, with its Liberal Democrat accomplices, has trebled tuition fees, abolished the education maintenance allowance and cut child benefit. While wages remain lower than a decade ago and housing costs have soared, more and more food banks are opening up in Britain. In Great Yarmouth, one has just been opened for pupils at a school, and last week the Department for Business established a food bank for its own staff in its building on Victoria Street. Can the Prime Minister tell us what is going wrong in modern Britain when a Government office in the centre of London has a food bank for some of its very low-paid staff to get something to eat?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I think that the best way to ensure that people have a good, stable income for their families is to ensure that they are in work. That is the fourth question he has asked me, and in none of his questions so far has he welcomed the fact that employment is at record levels, and unemployment is down at a record low. The way he talks, you would think that inequality started in 2010.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** It did!

**The Prime Minister:** One of the Labour Back Benchers shouts from a sedentary position, “It did!” Who was it who said that the last Labour Government “ensured that the gap between the richest and the poorest in our society” became “very much bigger?” Those are not my words; they are the words of the right hon. Gentleman, attacking his own Labour Government.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** My question was about food banks in a Government office—\[Interuption.\]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am very, very worried about you, Mr Speaker. You used to be such a calm and measured fellow. You are now behaving in an extraordinarily eccentric manner—almost delinquent. Calm yourself, young man, and your condition will improve.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** My question was about a food bank in a Government Ministry, which seems to suggest that in-work poverty is the problem in Britain.

The Trussell Trust handed out 1.6 million food parcels last year, half a million of which went to children. A new report out today by the End Child Poverty coalition shows that child poverty has risen by half a million and is becoming the new norm in this country. The End Child Poverty coalition called on Ministers to restore the link between inflation and social security. Will the Prime Minister do that, to try to reduce the disgraceful levels of child poverty in this country?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about helping those who are low paid. It is this Government—it is a Conservative Government—who introduced the national living wage. And what do we see? Under Labour, someone working full time on the national minimum wage would have taken home £9,200 a year. Now they take home over £13,700—£4,500 more under the Conservatives for the lowest paid. That is the Conservatives caring for the low paid in our society.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** They may have changed the name, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that child poverty will rise to over 5 million by 2022 at the current rate because of the strategies being followed by the right hon. Lady’s Government.

When the wealth of the richest 1,000 people in Britain has increased by £50 billion in one year, but there is not enough money to properly feed our children or pay workers a decent wage, we have failed as a society. This country is seeing the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, while the Government are in the pockets of a super-rich elite. More children in poverty, more pensioners in poverty, more people struggling to make ends meet: when are the right hon. Lady and her Government
going to reverse the tax giveaways to the super-rich and make sure they pay their fair share of taxes, so we can end the scandal—and it is a scandal—of inequality in modern Britain?

The Prime Minister: In fact, as I have pointed out, the top 1% are paying more in income tax today than they ever did under a Labour Government. But what have we seen from Labour in just the past week? The Labour party has a plan for a system where everybody in this country would get benefits. That means handouts to hedge fund managers paid for by tax hikes on working people. Labour’s policy—money for the rich, paid by taxes on the poor.

Q6. [910906] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As already noted, 40 years ago, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. During her premiership, she convinced people like me and people from modest backgrounds right across the country that it is the Conservative party that is the party of opportunity and aspiration. Does the Prime Minister agree that education plays a pivotal role in unlocking these opportunities and enabling social mobility, and will education and skills funding receive the attention it therefore deserves in the upcoming spending round?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are already putting record levels of funding into our schools—£43.5 billion. My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me to talk about the spending review that is upcoming, but I can assure him that we are committed to improving education for every child, because I absolutely passionately believe that we should be making sure that how far a child goes in life depends not on their background, their circumstances or who their parents are, but on their individual talents and their hard work. Everybody in this country should be able to go as far as their talents and their hard work will take them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in welcoming Mental Health Awareness Week.

Mr Speaker, pending your approval, we now know that the Prime Minister’s three-times defeated Brexit deal will return yet again in June. Can the Prime Minister tell us: has a back-room agreement been reached with the Leader of the Opposition to sell out the people of Scotland and to force her shoddy deal through?

The Prime Minister: The only party that wants to sell out the interests of Scotland is the SNP, with its bid for independence.

Ian Blackford: I am not quite sure what that had to do with the question. You might at least try, Prime Minister, to answer the question. The people of Scotland are none the wiser about what is going on in the secret Tory-Labour talks. Scotland’s people, and the will of the Scottish Parliament, are being ignored. Enough is enough. Why is the Prime Minister so afraid of giving the people of Scotland their say? The fact is, at the European elections next week the people of Scotland will make their voices heard, whether Westminster likes it or not. Next Thursday, the people of Scotland can vote SNP to stop Brexit and to send a clear message that Scotland will not be ignored any more.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the people of Scotland not knowing where things stand. Well, the people of Scotland will know where things stand if the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues vote for the withdrawal agreement Bill and ensure that we leave the European Union. If people want to vote for a party that not only is a Brexit party but is a party in government that can deliver Brexit, they should vote Conservative.

Q12. [910912] Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Can the Prime Minister confirm that, if we were to stay in a customs union and the single market, we would have to pay billions into the European Union, we could not do free trade deals around the world and we could not control our own immigration, and that we will never betray the promise that we made at the last general election that we will deliver the full Brexit—unlike the broken promises from the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that we do indeed remain committed, and not just to delivering Brexit and to securing a majority in this House to do just that; I can reassure him on his specific points. In leaving the European Union, we want to—we will—end free movement, restore full control over our immigration policy, open up new trading opportunities around the world and end the days of sending vast payments to the European Union, and we will not pay for market access. He mentions commitments that were made at the last election. He and I both stood on a manifesto promising to deliver the best possible deal for Britain as we leave the European Union, delivered by a smooth, orderly Brexit, as we seek a new deep and special partnership, including a comprehensive free trade and customs agreement with the European Union. I am committed to those objectives. I believe that we have negotiated a good deal that delivers on those and I am determined to deliver it.

Q2. [910902] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This Government say they are committed to tackling climate change, yet too often the evidence suggests otherwise. Take the examples of their support for an oil refinery in Bahrain but their refusal to help award-winning tidal energy specialists Nova Innovation. The reality is, 99.4% of UK export finance in the energy sector goes on fossil fuel projects. If this Government are serious about addressing the climate emergency, will they prove it by investing in the future, not the past?

The Prime Minister: We are investing in the future and not the past. That is why we have been encouraging issues like electric vehicles—the battery technology that is being developed here in the UK. The hon. Gentleman talks about our interest and our support for what we need to do on climate change. Just look at our record. Our renewable energy capacity has quadrupled since 2010; annual support for renewables will be over £10 billion by 2021; 99% of solar power deployed in the UK has been deployed under the Conservatives in government; and we have been decarbonising at a faster rate than any other country in the G20.

Q13. [910913] Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): It is vital for trust in the Prime Minister and the Government for dates to be set and then stuck to. Can we have a definitive and unalterable date for the release of the Green Paper on adult care?
We will be publishing it at the earliest opportunity and it will set out those proposals to ensure that the social care system is sustainable into the future. We want to ensure that, when we do that, we are able to bring forward proposals that deliver the answer, or possible answers, to the question we have to ask ourselves, which is how we can ensure that the social care system is sustainable into the future.

The Prime Minister: From the hon. Gentleman’s references to those of us across this House, it is obvious that his charm offensive to become the next Speaker has already started. May I also say to him that it is in the interests of Scotland that it remains part of the United Kingdom, and in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom that we deliver on what people voted for in the referendum and deliver Brexit?

The Prime Minister: What is important as children go through their education is that we make sure they are receiving the right education for them and we make sure that schools are providing the right quality of education. Simple tests that enable judgments to be made about where children are in relation to their learning through their school career are, I believe, right. It is right that they were introduced and it is right that they continue.

Q4. [910904] Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but it is looking a bit threadbare over on the Conservative Back Benches below the gangway. Maybe we should examine the reason why. The Government can barely secure double figures in the opinion polls. The UK is now an international laughing-stock, with the Prime Minister’s Back Bench just wanting her going, as does the nation. She is now going to be bringing back her withdrawal agreement for a fourth tanking, as her Back Bench queue up to say they will not support her. Has the road now just run out, Prime Minister? For the sake of her nation, will she please just go—and let Scotland go too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of mental health in universities. It is important and it is a priority for the Government. NHS England is already working closely with Universities UK, through the Mental Health in Higher Education programme, to build the capability and capacity of universities to improve student welfare services and access to mental health services. However, I am happy to ask both the Health and Education Secretaries to consider options to look at the issue further.

Q5. [910905] Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): As this is Mental Health Awareness Week, does the Prime Minister agree that innovative ways to help students with mental health issues are needed? Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care improve student welfare services and access to mental health services? Is it not time that the universities were required to have a duty of care towards every student?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about the increasing number of children in Somerset in good and outstanding schools compared with 2010—great news—but, despite 5.9% more funding per pupil going into Somerset, teachers and parents in Taunton Deane are increasingly coming to me to say that they are under funding pressures. They are in the fifth lowest for secondary school funding and the bottom third for primary school funding. Does the Prime Minister agree that to give our children the very best opportunity in life we must correct that funding injustice in Somerset? With a stronger economy overseen by this Government, we can and should do it.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about the increasing number of children in Somerset in good and outstanding schools. It is indeed, as she says, our management of the strong economy that enables us to put more money into our public services, such as education. That is why we are putting a record level of funding into schools this year, giving every local authority more money for every pupil in every school. We have introduced the new funding formula to make distribution fairer across schools across the country. We want to keep on improving education for every child so that, as I said in response to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), we have the opportunity to ensure that every child can go on and achieve their full potential.

Rosie Duffield: I am glad that every child has the opportunity to go on to the best that the country can offer, but other countries are already offering a higher level of support and students. Will the Prime Minister agree that the education system needs to keep up with the best in the world?

The Prime Minister: This is Mental Health Awareness Week, does the Prime Minister agree that innovative ways to help students with mental health issues are needed? Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care improve student welfare services and access to mental health services? Is it not time that the universities were required to have a duty of care towards every student?

The Prime Minister: What is important as children go through their education is that we make sure they are receiving the right education for them and we make sure that schools are providing the right quality of education. Simple tests that enable judgments to be made about where children are in relation to their learning through their school career are, I believe, right. It is right that they were introduced and it is right that they continue.

Q7. [910907] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister is now well aware that I have had the privilege of serving the people of Huddersfield for 40 years, but is she aware that when I came into this House I was a passionate Euroseptic? I changed my mind because I saw how the European Union delivered prosperity, cleaned up the environment, and kept the peace and our security. That changed my mind about the value to all the people of this country, as well as my constituents, of staying in the EU. Is it not time that the Prime Minister spoke out on the truth about Europe, rather than the big lie of the UK Independence party?

The Prime Minister: This House voted for the referendum. The Government at the time said they would abide by the decision of the referendum. The people voted, the people made their choice, and it is right that the Government deliver on that choice and deliver Brexit.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his coming into this House and that he has been serving his constituents for 40 years. He mentioned prosperity. Actually, in 1979 it was a Conservative Government that came in and turned around all the problems of a Labour Government and gave this country prosperity.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): On behalf of animal lovers across the country, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on introducing Lucy’s law to stamp out the horrific and barbaric practice of puppy and kitten farming? However, this law applies only to England. With the Welsh consultation closing this week, does my
right hon. Friend agree that unless the SNP Government now act to introduce Lucy’s law, there is a real risk of Scotland becoming a hub for unscrupulous puppy farmers? Scotland cannot be left behind.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I congratulate him on the work he did on this issue—he raised it regularly and championed the cause. It is ironic that, as an MP for a Scottish seat, he was able to help to change the law here in England and ensure it was brought in, yet the SNP Government in Scotland are not willing to change the law. It is time the SNP Government got on with the day job and started legislating for things that matter to people in Scotland.

Q8. [910909] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that it is her deal, no deal or no exit from the EU. We voted against her deal, and we voted against no deal for good reasons, but she has not shifted and she is out of time. Will she admit now that all that is left is no exit, or will she go back to the people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well my response to the question about going back to the people. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum in 2016. They voted, they gave their decision, and it is we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum. 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now press for a managed access agreement to be put in place as soon as possible, because the children who need this drug cannot afford to wait a single day longer?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raised a very important issue at the time, and I am very pleased that NHS England and Biogen have agreed a deal that enables NICE to recommend this revolutionary new treatment. As he said, it has the potential to transform the lives of young children with spinal muscular atrophy and their families, and I will certainly ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care acts on his request that it be made available as quickly as possible.

Q11. [910911] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Research by the “Victoria Derbyshire” show has revealed that in the last five years four children have been murdered following contact granted by the family courts to known abusers. This morning, more than 120 MPs wrote to the Justice Secretary calling for an independent inquiry into the treatment by the family courts of victims of domestic abuse and violence. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is something wrong with a system that forces contact between children and parents who are known risks to the child? If she does agree, will she commission that independent inquiry today?

The Prime Minister: The family courts system should never be used to coerce or re-victimise those who have been abused, and the child’s welfare must be the paramount consideration of the court in any proceedings. I am pleased that the president of the family division published new draft guidelines just last week that provided greater clarity on issues around the family courts, such as increasing transparency. The Ministry of Justice has not seen evidence to suggest a public inquiry is necessary, but I will ensure that the new Minister of State meets the hon. Lady to discuss the concerns she has raised.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Prime Minister congratulate the hard-working campaign team in Redditch who secured an increased majority on the borough council in the local elections earlier this month? Will she visit Redditch to find out how they are putting in place plans to unlock Redditch, and will she recommit her Government’s resources to the crucial issue of regenerating towns and high streets up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate all those campaigners—those elected councillors—on their success in the Redditch Borough Council election, and I am pleased to see the council moving forward with its plans to improve the town. Certainly we remain committed: we have allocated sums to ensure that we see improvements in towns up and down the country, and we continue our commitment to that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the invitation. I will ensure that my diary secretary is aware of it, and we will see whether it is possible.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My constituent Gerald Corrigan was shot with a crossbow outside his home on Good Friday. This weekend, he died of those severe injuries. I am sure that the House will join me in sympathising with his family, his partner and his friends. The community is in shock. Will the Prime Minister join me in appealing to the public for any information that they may have, and to give that information to North Wales police in confidence? Will she assure me that, in view of the number of such incidents, the law on crossbows will be reviewed, and will she also ensure that the police have enough resources to conduct what is now a murder inquiry?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very worrying case, and, as he says, the thoughts of the whole House are with the family, friends and partner of his constituent. It is terrible to hear of an incident such as this. The Home Secretary has heard what the hon. Gentleman said about the law on crossbows, and I absolutely join him in encouraging any member of the public who has any information about what happened to get in touch with the police. There is, of course, the anonymous route, which enables people who may be concerned about giving information to the police to ensure that it reaches them without being identified. If anyone knows anything that could help the police to catch those responsible, I urge them to come forward.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): For more than 20 years I have worked with an incredible group of Conservatives in Wellingborough and Rushden. They raise money for the party, they deliver leaflets and they knock on doors, week in, week out. This Saturday, some 40 of us went out campaigning for the European elections. Unfortunately, Sir, I have here a letter from those Conservatives, addressed to the Prime Minister. They say that her deal is worse than staying in the European Union, and that they want us to come out now on a no-deal basis. More importantly, Sir, they have lost confidence in the Prime Minister, and wish her to resign before the European elections. Prime Minister, what message have you for those dedicated and loyal Conservatives?

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank all members of the Conservative party across the country who campaign regularly in elections of all sorts. We have heard about the group in Redditch Borough Council who succeeded in getting excellent results in the council election. I thank all those Conservatives for the time and effort that they put into promoting the Conservative cause.

Secondly, let me say to Conservatives up and down the country who are concerned about delivering Brexit that this is a Government who want to deliver Brexit, and have been working to deliver Brexit. Sadly, so far the House of Commons has not found a majority to do that. If everyone in the House of Commons had voted alongside the Government and the majority of Conservative Members of Parliament, we would already have left the European Union.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The people of Hornsey and Wood Green are completely distraught because a British Council worker, Aras Amiri, has been suddenly imprisoned in Iran. The Foreign Secretary is kindly having a meeting with me and the family on Friday, but will the Prime Minister please condemn this action by Iran, and will she please speak to President Rouhani urgently about this terrible situation?
The Prime Minister: Obviously, we are concerned. We are always concerned when any individual is sentenced purely on the basis of their employment with an entirely legitimate institution, as has happened in this case. It is utterly shocking, and I am deeply concerned by the turn of events. My thoughts are with the individual and her family at this time.

As the hon. Lady says, the Foreign Secretary is taking the issue up. The Government will press the case and the concerns that have been raised, but sadly the arrest of this individual shows Iran’s attitude to entirely legitimate organisations that are trying to foster better relations and cultural understanding between countries.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Prime Minister is rightly regarded by Scottish Conservatives as a trenchant champion of the Union—and thank goodness for that. Does she agree that the UK shared prosperity fund is an opportunity to strengthen the Union? Will she confirm that the fund will be led by the needs of communities, and will not be Barnettised?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that we have an opportunity, with the shared prosperity fund, to ensure that we recognise the ways in which we can reduce disparities between communities and between the nations within the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend said, it is absolutely right that that should be led by the needs on the ground. We should make sure that the money is spent effectively, and that it delivers for people. That is our intention.
Points of Order

12.46 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Forty-two years ago, in the early hours of the morning, a brave British soldier from 3 Company 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards was abducted or captured by the IRA. Captain Robert Nairac was my captain. He was a gentleman who, in the boxing ring, broke my nose—the first person to have done so. We still do not know what happened to him. The country owes a debt to our soldiers in Northern Ireland, and particularly to those who have given the utmost for their country. Mr Speaker, is there any way for me to mark 42 years since Captain Robert Nairac gave his life for this country and for the peace of Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the point of order, and I am minded to hear that of the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Gavin Robinson), if it is on a similar subject. I believe it to be.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am mindful of the respect that should be shown to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). On 31 January, I sought and received an assurance from the Attorney General that any proposal that was brought forward to protect veterans would apply equally across the United Kingdom. In fact, he said it would be plainly wrong should it not apply equally. I am therefore perturbed to read in the press—and not hear in this House—that proposals brought forward to protect veterans from our country will not apply to Northern Ireland. Aside from the discourtesy to this House, it shows scant regard for the people the length and breadth of the United Kingdom who stood to protect our interests, our values and our democracy. Mr Speaker, are you aware of any indication from the Defence Secretary that she intends to make an oral statement on the matter?

Mr Speaker: I will respond to that point of order before coming to others. I have not been advised of any imminent statement by the Secretary of State, or indeed any other Minister, but I have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I recognise that this is a matter on which there are very strong feelings indeed. If he is dissatisfied with what he believes to be the Government’s intention, and with the absence of any confirmatory oral statement to clarify the matter, it is open to him to seek to air that further in the Chamber by means that are well known to him.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The nodding of the head in assent to my proposition by his right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the leader of his party, is testimony to their recognition of what I am saying. If they want to return to the matter very soon, it is open to them to seek to do so.

I am very sensitive to the point that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has raised, but rather than giving an inevitably provisional and possibly unsatisfactory reply off the top of my head, I say to him that I am very open to the idea of recognition in the way that he suggests. It seems to me that that warrants further discussion, and if he wants to come to see me, either alone or accompanied by colleagues—particularly if it is a cross-party delegation—I would be very open to seeing him and to exploring whether, and if so how, recognition might be provided. Meanwhile, I will of course take other points of order.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State for Defence announced overnight that she would introduce a Bill to bring in a 10-year statute of limitations on the kind of cases that we have been hearing about, but excluding those relating to Northern Ireland. Am I right in believing that that Bill would be amendable and that therefore, if the House chose to do so, we could bring Northern Ireland into it?

Mr Speaker: I have not seen the said Bill; I do not know whether it is yet drafted. I might be taking a modest risk in saying this, but with very few exceptions, Bills are amendable. Indeed, the concept of the unamendable Bill is by no means empirically proven. Sometimes people draft Bills in the hope that they cannot be amended, but their hope is usually dashed. I have no reason to suppose that a Bill of the type that the hon. Gentleman describes would be unamendable, and if it required a fertile mind, that would be no bar to the efforts and perspicacity of the hon. Gentleman.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Further to the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), Mr Speaker. Captain Nairac was posthumously awarded the George Cross, our highest civilian gallantry award. May I remind the House that he was tortured heinously for several hours, beaten up and hit with a wooden post. Eventually, an IRA terrorist killer came to him and said, “You’ve had it.” Apparently, Robert Nairac then said very little except to ask for God’s grace. He died in an incredibly gallant way, and I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that we should recognise the gallantry of this man.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I was particularly interested to hear him develop his point fully, even though it was not entirely a point of order, out of respect for the track record of not only his political service but his military service, which is well known across the House and which itself has been marked by extraordinary professionalism, resilience and bravery.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I entirely concur with my hon. and gallant Friends, and I welcome your approach to recognising Captain Robert Nairac, who served with such distinction and who died in such appalling circumstances. As I understand it, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is going to make a written statement rather than an oral statement—I/Interruption. She is nodding; perhaps I have got that wrong. I should like to make the point, if I may, that this pursuit of 200 of our armed forces veterans for things that were allegedly done many years ago is totally unacceptable and it must end forthwith.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and alacrity, and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. There is certainly no confirmation of the notion of a written statement, and he will have seen dissent from that proposition. I am aware that consideration has been given to a statement, but I think it would be seemly if we were to leave it there and await the development of events. I say in all courtesy to the hon. Gentleman, and I do not expect him to dissent from this, that I do not want to produce a ranking list today, but suffice it to say that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has in my experience been among the most courteous of members of the Government in keeping the Chair informed of her intentions and trying to do the right thing by the House. I have found her absolutely fastidious in that regard. Let us just wait to see how events unfold. I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I respect the sincerity with which he said it, just as I respect his own background as a soldier, which I am sure has motivated him today.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking your advice on an issue relating to my constituent, Sabir Zazai. Mr Zazai is to be honoured by the University of Glasgow for his service to civil society over the past 20 years. He is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Refugee Council. Understandably, he wishes his family to join him on that very special occasion but unfortunately Mr Zazai’s father’s visit visa has been refused. I have written to the Home Secretary about this matter, but his Department has unfortunately declined to intervene and referred my office back to UK Visas and Immigration, which has a 20 working day timeframe. The graduation is on 11 June, and the next opportunity for Home Office questions will not be until 3 June. Can you advise me of any other means or channels that I could use to raise this matter directly with the Home Secretary?

Mr Speaker: To a considerable extent, the hon. Gentleman has achieved his own salvation. He has aired the matter on the Floor of the House, and I rather imagine that the fact he has done so will quickly be communicated to the Government. If he is in any doubt on that point, he should try to ensure that his words are conveyed to UKVI sooner rather than later, and I would hope that some resolution can be achieved. The idea that the award should have to be deferred to some subsequent date naturally occurs, but it would be regrettable and I very much hope that he can achieve a speedy resolution to this matter. I quite understand why he wants this to happen, as anyone receiving such an award would naturally want to receive it duly accompanied.

WhatsApp Data Breach

12.56 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): After that significant and important point of order from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), I would like to ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the WhatsApp data breach.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I am responding to this question from the shadow Secretary of State because the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is in Paris for the G7 Digital Ministers meeting. He is meeting political and digital leaders from across the world, including senior representatives of Facebook, which owns WhatsApp, to ensure that the technology that is an increasing part of our daily lives is developed and managed in a safe and ethical manner.

I share the concern of all Members of the House about WhatsApp’s announcement of this vulnerability and the steps that it is taking to address it. In this instance, the National Cyber Security Centre has acted quickly to assess the risk to UK users and to publish guidance for our user base here in the UK. The NCSC has recommended that users protect their devices by installing updates as soon as they become available, and I would encourage any users with concerns to check the NCSC website. It is right that people should have confidence that their personal data will be protected and used fairly and lawfully.

The Data Protection Act 2018, which the Government passed last year, imposes strict obligations on organisations to ensure that UK citizens’ data is processed safely, securely and transparently. Organisations that fail to comply with the legislation may be investigated by the Information Commissioner’s Office, which received extra resources and more powers last year during the passage of that Bill. WhatsApp has designated the Irish Data Protection Commission as its European national regulator, and the ICO will work with and support its Irish counterpart so that the data of UK citizens is protected.

Cyber-security is of paramount importance to this Government, and our cyber-security strategy, which is supported by £1.9 billion of investment, sets out ambitious policies to protect UK citizens and businesses in cyber-space. Trust is the foundation of our digital economy. Cyber-security is absolutely vital in providing the stability and certainty that businesses need to thrive, and the public must have confidence in it.

Tom Watson: Here we are again: another day, another major data breach from a Mark Zuckerberg company. I am glad that the Secretary of State is with Facebook today, because we can suggest a number of questions for him to put to Facebook.

First, what has happened? Spyware called Pegasus, created by the Israeli security company NSO Group, has been used to hack the phones of lawyers and human rights activists. The news reports read like a nightmare: a dystopian world of tech-enabled total surveillance. The spyware transits malicious code via a WhatsApp call. The target does not even need to answer the call for the phone to be infected. According to
The New York Times, once the spyware is installed, it can extract everything: messages, contacts, GPS location, email and browser history. It can even use the phone’s camera and microphone to record the user’s surroundings.

That is terrifying.

About 1.5 billion people worldwide use WhatsApp and millions are here in the UK. Many of them will have been drawn to the service for its unique selling point: end-to-end encryption that ensures user privacy. Now we find that a gap in WhatsApp’s defences has enabled complete violation of that privacy. What is the Minister doing to work with GCHQ, the National Cyber Security Centre and tech industry players to protect the UK’s digital communications and privacy?

Media reports say that WhatsApp contacted the US Department of Justice earlier this month when it found out about the hack, but when was the Minister notified about it? When was the Information Commissioner informed? How many users in the UK are affected? Have those affected been notified? If the Minister does not know the answers, will she commit to updating the House when she does?

The spyware was licensed for export by the Israeli Government. What assurances can the Minister provide to social media companies that any digital surveillance products that the UK exports will not be misused to track and monitor human rights defenders? The particular vulnerability of WhatsApp was the voice over internet protocol—the process for receiving calls over the internet. As telecoms companies modernise, they are all moving away from calls over copper lines and phasing in calling via the internet. What is the Minister doing to ensure that those companies do not have vulnerabilities such as those we are discussing today?

The attack looks as if it was carried out by malicious actors, possibly other state actors, trying to close down journalists, dissidents, human rights activists and lawyers seeking justice, but exactly that kind of surveillance was given legal basis in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and I fought in the courts and won concessions on. The Government want tech companies to build back doors into their services, but this is an example of what happens if malicious actors find those doors: those who are fighting for justice and what is right come under attack. The Government must not allow that to happen.

Margot James: I share the shadow Secretary of State’s outrage and shock at this latest development and I agree that such transgressions happen far too frequently. At the Paris summit, the Secretary of State has already raised his deep concern about the latest report with Nick Clegg, the head of global affairs and communications for Facebook—[Laughter.] I am sorry that hon. Members find that amusing, but he is the senior head of global affairs for Facebook. He sits on the main board and is therefore the appropriate person for my Secretary of State to raise this matter with at the outset.

Of course, I share the shadow Secretary of State’s particular concern. WhatsApp is an encrypted service and therefore users are entitled to have even greater confidence in their privacy when they use it than when they use other social media platforms. The hon. Gentleman asked me what we are doing about it and when I was informed. I was informed of the breach, along with everybody else, earlier this week. I will have to find out from my Secretary of State later today exactly when he was informed.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern that the spyware was placed seemingly so easily on the WhatsApp service through using the phone contact part of it merely to call another number. That call, whether it was answered or not, meant that the spyware was installed directly on the user’s device. It is extremely worrying.

We are fortunate in Britain to have the National Cyber Security Centre and GCHQ, which are across those matters daily. We recently published the third cyber-security strategy, which includes several cyber-defence measures that are taken routinely and constantly, and updated. They are designed to deter and disrupt adversaries, to develop critical capabilities in the UK and to address systemic vulnerabilities as soon as they are identified. I meet the NCSC executive reasonably regularly and I take my responsibilities for cyber-security from the Department’s perspective extremely seriously.

I share the concern that a state could use this kind of attack to monitor human rights activists. That is deeply worrying. I am assured by the NCSC that we should all follow its current advice and that it is investigating the likelihood of any UK users being victims of the latest attack. As yet, I have no further information on that point to give to the House.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the incident reveals the evolving nature of the threat from cyber-space, and that the Government need to redouble their efforts across Government to work on the national cyber-security strategy, as well as to develop co-operative relationships with businesses, large and small, so that the threats can be robustly combated?

Margot James: My hon. Friend is right that the threat is evolving all the time and morphing from one aspect to another. It is therefore important that we keep business and citizens informed of what they can best do to protect themselves against the threats. As part of the national cyber-security strategy, we provide advice: the Cyber Essentials guide for businesses of all sizes and a small business guide on the NCSC website. The NCSC can provide tailored advice to companies when they are under a particular threat.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): This massive cyber-security breach underlines why we need to be part of the European institutions designed to tackle those issues. For example, leaving the European Defence Agency and its policies will make the UK substantially more vulnerable to cyber-attacks.

The Minister was asked about the timing of the information. The hack was discovered a month ago, so when exactly did the company alert the Government and the security services? Have the Government taken any action? The US Justice Department was apparently told last week. Have the security services ever used the Pegasus malware or similar spyware software? Do the Government have any contracts with the NSO Group, which in 2018 had revenues of $251 million, or indeed with WhatsApp?
Margot James: In relation to our membership of the European Union and impending Brexit, as long as Britain leaves with a deal, preferably the deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated, we will have continued access on a smooth basis to much of that vital information.

The hon. Gentleman asks when the Government were informed. I answered that question in my reply to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). I was informed earlier this week, and I will find out from the Secretary of State when he was informed; I suspect he was informed earlier than I was.

On Pegasus and other types of malware, I can assure the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) that GCHQ and the NCSC ensure that this country has excellent, state-of-the-art malware detection systems in play at all times.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): People largely believed that as WhatsApp is encrypted, it is a safe app. Now we suddenly discover that perhaps it is not safe after all. This is deeply worrying and has caused deep unease in society. What is the Minister doing to restore public confidence in data protection? We have various Acts in place, but we have to restore that confidence. Can she give assurances that Mr Zuckerberg has fixed the flaw and will be brought to task?

Margot James: I will answer the questions that I can answer. I cannot speak for what Facebook and WhatsApp are doing, but I can assure my hon. Friend that, as part of the general data protection regulation across Europe, the Data Protection Act has put in place the strongest privacy standards, rules and laws anywhere in the world. In our Information Commissioner’s Office we have the best resourced ICO in Europe, and we gave the commissioner enhanced powers last year. The ICO has shown itself to be superb in utilising those powers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This WhatsApp scandal demonstrates again that the Government’s online harms White Paper is too little, too late, as it deals only with harms arising from user-generated content. What we need is a robust regulatory framework that assigns rights and responsibilities.

When a vulnerability is identified, as the Minister has said, it is essential to install an update as quickly as possible. Too many of our citizens still do not have access to fixed wireless broadband and will be obliged to install the update over a mobile network, incurring significant charges. Who should pay those charges?

Margot James: I reassure the hon. Lady that we already have robust legislation in place through the introduction of GDPR. We also have competition law and a number of agencies. Indeed, Opposition Members usually complain that we have too many regulatory bodies in this space. We have the Competition and Markets Authority, Ofcom and the Information Commissioner’s Office, and we will be setting up a powerful regulator on the back of our online harms White Paper. People should be taking more responsibility for the security of their devices, and the NCSC has very good user advice on its website.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): No Government would find it easy to cope with the rapidly changing character of technology and its associated protocols, and I congratulate the Minister on both her diligence and commitment. I am pleased that, as the former Minister responsible, I put in place the means and methods to deal with this issue in the form of the strategy and the NCSC. However, would she acknowledge that, for too long, we assumed that these big tech companies could be asked, not told; and requested, not obliged? We cannot be too tough in dealing with these matters, for at risk is the welfare of our citizenry and our nation.

Margot James: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his previous work. I strongly agree with his thesis that a voluntary approach of asking companies for their co-operation has not produced the needed change in a timely manner, which is exactly why in the White Paper we published last month we concluded that statutory regulation that places on companies a duty of care for their users, backed up by a powerful regulator, is the answer to these problems.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is absolutely delighted to have been congratulated by the Minister on the delivery of his thesis, as he is of a notable academic and, some would say, even philosophical bent.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Following this very serious WhatsApp security breach, what assurances can the Minister provide that social media companies in the UK will ensure that the products they export cannot be misused to track or monitor human rights activists and others who might themselves subsequently face human rights abuses? Can she also inform the House specifically whether any MP has been targeted?

Margot James: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that assurance, but I can say that the early investigations point to this being a highly targeted attack. As I said earlier, the NCSC is investigating whether UK citizens, including Members of this House, might have been the butt of the attack. We await further information on that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is somewhat ironic that the former Home Secretary tried to get WhatsApp to overcome its security so that, for national security purposes, we could access messages.

What messages have been given to British aid workers working overseas and to people working in human rights environments who may be vulnerable to attack if WhatsApp messages are leaked? Surely they should be given a very strong message not only to upgrade but to be very cautious about their use of WhatsApp until this problem is fixed.

Margot James: I agree with my hon. Friend that such attacks undermine the confidence of users, which is why it is in the interests of manufacturers to make sure that security is much more heavily designed into their software products and devices before they are released to the consumer.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The 1.5 billion WhatsApp users worldwide—millions of them here in the UK—have been attracted by its end-to-end
encryption and the guarantee that their messages are secure, but they are relying on old-fashioned media to find out about this breach and to be told to update devices. What conversations has the Minister or the Secretary of State had with WhatsApp to prompt it to alert users to update the app? At the moment, I fear that many of the millions of WhatsApp users here in the UK will not have updated their app, and they should do so urgently.

Margot James: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that on hearing about this—it is ironic that people have to hear about it through traditional print media and television—they really should update WhatsApp. People should get into the habit of installing security updates whenever they are prompted to do so by an app, and they should do it proactively. It is easy to visit the app store and select all updates, which is a routine security precaution that users should take.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): This is obviously a very serious data breach, as acknowledged on both sides of the Chamber. Of course, the recent Data Protection Act enhances the powers of the Information Commissioner’s Office, which could implement a fine of up to 4% of global revenue. Facebook’s revenue last quarter was over £16 billion, which could go quite a long way to helping cover the costs of our security services in countering the challenges in the digital space. Does the Minister believe that a fine would be appropriate in these circumstances?

Margot James: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House of the significant powers that the ICO now has. Of course, the powers are there to enforce and protect the privacy of UK users. It remains to be seen whether UK users have been affected by this breach but, if they have, I am sure the ICO will make further inquiries.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest, as set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I am sure the Minister will want to encourage the increasing number of her colleagues who have their own budding leadership WhatsApp groups to update their app. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) made an important point that this is not only about encryption but about the connection between devices and the transition from the old copper cables to the VoIP system of broadband connectivity. This is a question for Ofcom, not the ICO, so what conversations is the Minister having with Ofcom about the security standards for connections over the internet-based communications network?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for quite rightly raising the role of Ofcom. I have regular meetings with the chief executive of Ofcom, and I will certainly raise the matter the hon. Gentleman has raised with me at my next meeting with her.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid the Minister’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) was less than convincing. The reality is that WhatsApp is a critical app that is used in everyday life by millions of people across the UK. It is therefore of national importance that its resilience is protected, and the state has an interest in making sure that that happens. Why is the Minister not compelling WhatsApp to ensure that all users in the United Kingdom are alerted to the potential data breach and are obliged to upgrade the software accordingly?

Margot James: I think that that is precisely the content of the discussion my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had with Facebook just this morning. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. WhatsApp and any other platform where there has been a serious breach of this kind should take responsibility for informing its entire user base immediately. I completely concur with that.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There will be millions of people with a serious concern that their data—their conversations with loved ones and business contacts—has been stolen by this spyware, and they will want to know that someone is being held accountable. Does the Minister now agree that it is time to add Government pressure to the pressure from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee to have Mark Zuckerberg come to Parliament to explain what has gone wrong with Facebook and WhatsApp, and to make sure we can restore some public trust in him and his company?

Margot James: It is vital that we hold platforms—in this case, WhatsApp—to account for breaches that have occurred. If these breaches have resulted in UK users’ data being compromised, the ICO has the powers to investigate them thoroughly. It also has a sanctions regime, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) pointed out includes a potential fine of up to 4% of global turnover. The ICO has proved itself to be a forceful regulator, and I am sure it will be watching this space with great interest.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Although we know that data breaches have happened previously, the difficulty is that we have had no adequate response from Facebook since evidence of those data breaches came through. Is the reality that we have to have legislation in place?

We are now in an election period, with WhatsApp and closed Facebook groups being used, as we speak, in electoral campaigning, but the law has not changed since the DCMS Committee, on which I serve, raised these issues. We have yet another instance of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. We have to act, and the Cabinet Office and the Select Committee need, as a matter of urgency, to take forward steps relating to the electoral position, which is so vulnerable and about which we will learn nothing before polling day next Thursday.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman raises a subject that is top of my priority list at the moment. My Department works with the Cabinet Office on making our electoral laws fit for the internet age. As he made clear, there is a huge requirement in terms of updating, and I have read the Select Committee report, which is extremely alarming. The ICO is undertaking a number of investigations into matters of concern around our democracy and the security of our democracy. I advise all Members to have a good look at the ICO website,
where they should find a draft political code of practice—which the ICO has developed under the powers handed to it under the Data Protection Act last year—with advice to political parties on how they use social media platforms and the data available to them from those platforms. It is a very serious matter.

**Bob Blackman:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just looked at the version history of the WhatsApp advice on what to update. There is no mention whatever of security breaches or the need to update WhatsApp because of security. The advice talks about having stickers in full size, entering phone numbers and seeing who is on WhatsApp. There is nothing about security.

**Mr Speaker:** I note what the hon. Gentleman has said, and it will have been heard by Members of the House, who may well share his reaction to it. I thank him for taking this opportunity to put the matter on the record.

**Speaker’s Statement**

1.25 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to the next urgent question, I must inform the House that Dr Andrew Murrison has written to me giving notice of his wish to resign from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I therefore declare the Chair vacant. In doing so, I hope the whole House will want to join me in appreciation of the work of Dr Murrison in chairing the Select Committee with great commitment and skill. Moreover, colleagues will be aware that he has left the Chair of the Committee because he has returned to the service of the Executive. He has become a Minister again, and he was performing from the Treasury Bench yesterday at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. We wish him well in the execution of his important new responsibilities and congratulate him on his success.

The following will be the arrangements for electing a new Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Nominations should be submitted in the Lower Table Office or the procedural hub by 5 pm on Monday 10 June. Following the House’s decision of 4 July 2017, only members of the Conservative party may be candidates in this election. Colleagues will understand why that is so, but for the benefit of those attending our proceedings who are not Members of the House, that is because of the distribution of Chairs between the parties. This particular Committee has been designated for a Conservative Chair in this Parliament. If there is more than one candidate, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 12 June from 10 am to 1.30 pm in Committee Room 16. A briefing note with more details about this election will be made available to Members.
Learning Disabilities Mortality Review

1.27 pm
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the learning disabilities mortality review.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I would like to start by restating our commitment to reducing the number of preventable deaths among those of our population with a learning disability and to addressing the persistent health inequalities that they experience. It is completely unacceptable that people in our country with a learning disability, and indeed autism, can expect a shorter life than the population as a whole.

Each and every death that might have been prevented is an absolute tragedy, and we must not compound that tragedy by failing to learn any lessons we can that might improve the care that is provided in the future. That is why the Government asked NHS England in the first place to commission the learning disabilities mortality review programme, known as LeDeR. The principle behind it is a relentless determination to learn from these deaths and to put in place changes to the way care is organised, provided and experienced, to make a real difference locally and nationally. It means challenging often deep-rooted, systematic or cultural issues that have existed for decades. It is driven by the fact that we are clear that the quality of care offered to people with a learning disability sometimes falls very short of the standards we expect, and that is simply not good enough.

The existence of the LeDeR programme testifies to our commitment to address this issue so that people with a learning disability can access the best possible care and support. The annual reports published by the LeDeR programme and the recommendations it makes are all part of this.

Over the weekend, the media reported on the findings of a draft of the third annual LeDeR report, which is due to be published shortly. In making this statement, I would like to record my deep regret at this apparent leak. It is also a regret that Her Majesty’s Opposition should table an urgent question based on leaks and, indeed, that the Speaker’s Office should see fit to grant it. More generally, the House—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister will resume her seat. Forgive me, but I was being approached by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

I have the highest regard for the Minister, who is always a person of the utmost courtesy. She can have an opinion about the decision of a Member to apply for an urgent question; it is not for a Member on the Treasury Bench to seek to offer a judgment on the way in which the Speaker discharges his responsibilities as Speaker. I have made a judgment that this matter warrants the attention of the House, and that judgment is not to be argued with or contradicted by a Member of the House. The Minister’s duty is to come to the House and answer the question, but do not argue the toss with the Chair. That is the wrong way to behave.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you for clarifying that, Mr Speaker. I do not dispute that this is absolutely the right place and time to discuss this very important issue, but more broadly I think that Members across the House need to take a clearer view on how we discuss and view leaks, and to take a more consistent approach to that, because in recent weeks we have seen leaked information discussed in a very different way in the House.

Mr Speaker: I understand. I hope I heard the hon. Lady correctly and I think I heard her correctly. She said what she said, and I am happy that she has offered that clarification or explanation of her thinking. I have no desire to have any argument with her about the matter. The issue is what needs to be aired, rather than the procedural question, but she has said what she has said on that, and I am sure she will now want to attend to the specifics of the inquiry.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With regard to the LeDeR programme, I have committed in the past and will commit once again to bringing the final report before Parliament on the day of publication, which we are told by NHS England will be in the next few weeks. Members will feel as concerned as I do about some of the things in the report that have been leaked, and I will be happy to discuss the more detailed information when the report is fully published.

Barbara Keeley: Well, this is a mess, isn’t it? Last year, the first report from this important review was sneaked out on a Friday, in the middle of the local election results, and this year we have read about it through leaks to The Sunday Times and the Health Service Journal. The Minister says that it is a draft that is going to be published shortly; I understand that the authors handed it over on 1 March. How long does it take the Department to turn round a draft? Clearly, somebody somewhere thinks it should be out there, because somebody somewhere is leaking it. Will the Minister take responsibility for this process and ensure that future reports are published in a timely manner? I am not happy with “shortly” or “in a few weeks”; will she tell us when the full copy of the report—not just what was leaked, first in the Sunday papers and now in the Health Service Journal—will be available?

It appears from the leak that the review has been able to consider only a quarter of the premature deaths reported to it, leaving more than 3,000 families waiting for closure—it is those 3,000 families on whom we should be focusing—and that well over a third of cases do not even have a reviewer assigned to them. That shows that, as we suspected last year, the LeDeR programme is significantly under-resourced, so will the Minister pledge now to ensure that the review has the resources it needs in future?

Last year, the Government made 24 specific commitments relating to the annual report, and 15 of them were due to be completed by now. Will the Minister update the House on the progress on those commitments?

The leak tells us that the review found that in 8% of cases the care given “fell so short of good practice that it significantly impacted on their wellbeing or directly contributed to their cause of death”. What is the Minister doing now to ensure that no more people with learning disabilities die early because of poor care?
Lastly, and most disgracefully—I am certainly going to mention this from the leaked report—the report says that over a period of two years, at least 19 people with learning disabilities who died had “learning disabilities” or “Down’s syndrome” given as the reason not to resuscitate them. A patient having a learning disability or Down’s syndrome is not a reason to put a “do not resuscitate” order on their care. Does the Minister agree that such an approach, if it exists, smacks of eugenics and is completely unacceptable? What action will she take to ensure that it does not continue?

[Interruption.]

Caroline Dinenage: This is not a mess; the Department of Health and Social Care requested that NHS England commission the whole LeDeR programme. The report is an independent document, which is very important because we are talking about people’s lives and about deaths that could have been prevented. It is really important that the work is done by an independent group and that it is carefully scrutinised, and that that scrutiny and work to look at the recommendations—

[Interruption.] If the shadow Minister would like to bob up and ask some questions, I will happily answer them, but if she is going to keep murmuring from a sedentary position, I will not be able to address anything that she says.

It is so important to do this process in an independent way, because we are talking about people’s lives. NHS England says that the LeDeR report has not been published yet because it contains some serious recommendations, as have other such reports, and NHS England needs to make sure that the correct people will be responsible for implementing those recommendations and that the document can be scrutinised in the correct way before it is published. I understand that the shadow Minister is always keen to get things published as quickly as possible, and not always with the benefit of their being done as thoroughly as possible, but in this case we will not be pushed. This is an independent document and I cannot control when it will be published, but the shadow Minister can rest assured that when it is published, I will be happy to answer any questions that arise from it.

Members will feel, as I do, that recent press reports are a clear indication that we need to do more on this, and I assure the House that we recognise that. The LeDeR programme confirms how seriously we take the issue of premature mortality and differences in life expectancy. We will continue to work with partners across Government and throughout the health and social care system to consider any recommendations that improve care for people with learning disabilities and autism and address the shameful inequalities that they experience. Everybody has a right to expect effective, compassionate and dignified care. If someone has a learning disability, their expectations should be no different.

I have already stated that I do not intend to comment on the specifics of the leaked bits of the document, which is independent and has not yet been published. However, like other Members, I am particularly concerned about any suggestion that doctors were told that learning disability or Down’s syndrome is the reason for a “do not attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation” order—a DNACPR, as they call it. People with a learning disability have exactly the same right to enjoy a meaningful life as everyone else, and their disability should never, ever be used as an acceptable reason for a “do not resuscitate” order. We are taking immediate steps to ensure that doctors are reminded of their responsibilities and avoid any form of discrimination.

The LeDeR programme published its second annual report in May 2018, and the Government’s response, which we published in September 2018, set out a range of actions for the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and other national partners to help to reduce premature mortality and improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities. Many of those actions have now been completed—for example, we recently closed our consultation on the publication plans to introduce mandatory training in learning disability and autism awareness for health and care staff, and we will set out plans to move forward on that later in the year.

The latest report will no doubt reinforce what we already know: that the Government and our health and care system need to do more to ensure that people with a learning disability receive good-quality, informed and safe care. There has been a significant improvement—there has been a tenfold increase in the number of LeDeR review cases that have been covered, the backlog has improved, and in 2018-19 NHS England invested an additional £1.4 million to support the local teams to accelerate the process, as well as to train 2,100 experts to carry out reviews. The process is new, but we are pushing forward and putting in the necessary resources to make sure that we deliver on time. The LeDeR programme is there to help to achieve what we have set out, which is to make sure that those with a learning disability should never expect to receive worse health outcomes. We will respond to the full version of the report as soon as it is published.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I share the concern of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and the Minister about the fact that it appears that at least 19 patients had “do not resuscitate” orders specifically because of their learning disabilities. I welcome the fact that the Minister has made it clear that there will be an immediate notice to remind clinicians that that should never be a reason to not resuscitate a patient. May I ask her to go further, though? My understanding is that doctors should make “do not resuscitate” decisions only after a full discussion with their patient. It appears that, in these cases—without wishing to prejudge them—a doctor has made that decision without having had that discussion. Will the Minister also make it clear in her communication that the assumption should be that someone with a learning disability is just as capable of making these difficult decisions as everyone else? Their lives are worth as much as everyone else’s. That should be the assumption of everybody working in the national health service.
Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend makes a perfect point. As I have said, I will not go into the details of the report—the independent report—that have been leaked and that have not yet been published. However, we are very clear that treatment decisions must be based on objective information and should never, ever be based on assumptions about a person’s quality of life. We are very clear that a learning disability should never be used as a reason for a “do not resuscitate” notice. We will take steps to remind doctors of their responsibilities to ensure that they provide the same level of care for people with a learning disability as they do for others. He is absolutely right to point out that family members’ and personal opinion should always be taken into consideration and that no one’s life should ever be undervalued in this way.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, on granting it. This is a mess. The South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, on granting it. This is a mess. The learning disability training, on which this Government have recently concluded, is very important, why we have consulted so widely on how to deliver it, and why we will set out some really coherent plans later on in the year.

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. This very thorough consultation has received more than 5,000 responses. It has very recently concluded, and we are now going through those consultation responses, some of which are quite detailed. We hope to respond in the next two or three months to set out how we would like to move forward on this.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This question is similar to the “do not resuscitate” one. I am aware that a number of practitioners use seclusion, segregation and restraint against patients in the system. What is the Minister doing to stop that happening?

Caroline Dinenage: This is really important. We have seen an increase in reports of segregation and restraint, but that is partly because we have seen much better recording of the data. That is also very important, because we need to understand where people are being kept in seclusion or restrained inappropriately. The Secretary of State has asked the Care Quality Commission to review the matter and make recommendations about the use of restrictive interventions in settings that provide all sorts of residential care. The first part of that review will be reporting back very shortly.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I welcome the Minister’s clear statement that it is wholly unacceptable that people with learning disabilities continue to experience much shorter life expectancy. It is wholly unacceptable, but the problem is that we have all been saying this for years and nothing ever changes. We do not appear to be capable of learning the lessons that she says are necessary. One problem is that people with learning disabilities are often under the care of people who do not have the training necessary to understand the interaction between physical health conditions and learning disability. That is often the cause of that premature mortality. I brought together a group of clinicians who make the case for a new specialty in learning disability so that we have people who understand those crucial interactions between physical ill health and learning disability. Will the Minister meet me and those clinicians so that we can really understand how we can start to make a difference here rather than continuing to say that it is unacceptable and doing nothing effective about it?

Caroline Dinenage: I start by saying that I am always very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman because he has great expertise, knowledge and understanding of this field and often makes incredibly valuable suggestions. In response to his question, that is why the commitment to mandatory training for all health and care staff is absolutely vital. We should not forget that this is not just about medical professionals, but about people such as receptionists. The way that adults with learning disabilities and autism are treated by someone at the front desk of a health and care setting can immeasurably affect their interaction with that provider. That is why this training is so important, why we have consulted so widely on how to deliver it, and why we will set out some really coherent plans later on in the year.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I for one thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the House of Commons to turn the spotlight on people with learning disabilities? We should never miss an opportunity to talk about a part of our population whose problems are often swept under the carpet. That applies particularly to people with Down’s syndrome. We must proclaim that, in this country, there are no second-class citizens whatever disability a person might have, including Down’s syndrome. There are some countries, for instance Iceland, where there is virtual genocide—there is a 100% abortion rate for Down’s syndrome. Will the Minister proclaim now from the Dispatch Box that, if a person has Down’s syndrome, they are just as valued, just as loved, and just as cared for by society as anybody else?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not think I could have said it any better than my right hon. Friend. Mencap has put out a fantastic tweet featuring a particularly special young man who has Down’s syndrome. He is incredibly brilliant in the way that he articulates how very proud he is to live with Down’s syndrome and to be just as useful, just as important and just as special as everybody else, and how that makes him just as much a valued member of society as others—in fact probably more so.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is six years since Connor Sparrowhawk died, yet these leaks—you, leaks—indicate that 8% of the cases reviewed showed that people with learning disabilities had been harmed or even killed by the care that they received. What was meant to be helping them was actually harming them. That raises enormous questions, of course, about all the cases that have not been reviewed. The Minister said that action is being taken to deal with the backlog, but she knows that it is enormous. She must also know that the time that elapses after a death really counts for the amount of learning and the amount of change that will follow. Will she tell us exactly what she is doing to speed up the review of these cases, as it is just so important?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the case of Connor Sparrowhawk, which was an absolutely tragic lack of care. I have met his mum, Dr Sara Ryan, and I greatly value her feedback on how
[Caroline Dinenage]

we move forward with the LeDeR programme, because she has such an important insight into the matter. As I have said, NHS England is putting in additional funding to clear the backlog, and the NHS planning guidance for 2019-20 is very clear that clinical commissioning groups must have robust plans in place to make sure that LeDeR reviews are undertaken within six months of a notification of death in their local area. The resources are going in and the guidelines are there to ensure that that happens.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I must declare an interest: my sister was born with profound learning disabilities. Later this year, hopefully, she will celebrate her 60th birthday. During my lifetime, I have seen far too many young people with learning disabilities die prematurely. One of the biggest problems is when they suffer a physical problem and have to go to A&E, or through the primary care system. If a doctor or surgeon diagnoses that individual, part and parcel of the communication is talking to them and getting a response. People with profound learning disabilities cannot do that, so doctors often issue DNAs—I have personal experience of this—on people who are perfectly capable of having a perfectly good quality of life. Can my hon. Friend ensure that individuals who have profound disabilities have a named person from the health service who will give advice before any such decisions are made?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his impassioned plea; he makes an excellent point. We have spoken quite comprehensively today about how important it is that people with learning disabilities are never written off as a “do not resuscitate”, because that is absolutely wrong. I can tell him—I think he will find this useful—that we have introduced annual GP health checks for people with a learning disability to help to recognise these health inequalities, so that some long-term health conditions can be picked up much earlier and diagnosed more quickly, and prevention can be put in place much sooner.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder if the Minister recognises that for many families the review feels like the NHS marking its own homework, and that there needs to be more of an independent body to look at all the cases to give the reassurance that those families want.

Caroline Dinenage: I do recognise what the hon. Lady is saying. It is difficult to know how best to analyse something as tragic as a death—how to bring forward all the relevant expertise. That is why NHS England works with the University of Bristol on this programme. It is a very new programme—the report to be published shortly will only be the third one—and we are always open to ways in which it can be improved and seen to be more independent, more thorough and to make more difference.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the review and understand the Minister’s reluctance to comment on rumours and leaks, but as a point of principle does she agree that access to specialist services and care, as well as early and accurate diagnosis, is really important and should be consistently applied across the country? Will she therefore assure me that people with learning disabilities in Worcestershire will receive the same good service as people elsewhere in the country—in Birmingham or London, for example?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that nobody with a learning disability, autism or any other condition should expect to receive worse care. Everybody should expect the same level of quality care, no matter who they are or where in the country they live. That is what we are working towards, and learning from deaths is a key element of helping to deliver that aim.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Minister condemn “do not resuscitate” instructions based on a person having a learning disability, but surely this situation is not a matter of mild neglect requiring a reminder letter; this is a grave abuse of power perpetrated on some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Does it not require disciplinary action?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman has partly tapped into my frustration with the fact that I am here today commenting on leaks of a report that has not yet been published, rather than on the full report, which, when it comes out, will provide clear recommendations as to how we can move forward on this matter. As I have said, we are already writing to reinforce the message that should be self-evident—that learning disabilities should never be a reason for a “do not resuscitate”. When the report is finally published, it will include a very well-considered recommendation as to how we tackle this issue in a way that will ensure that this situation will never happen in future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Thank you for allowing this urgent question, Mr Speaker. We should acknowledge that those with learning disabilities have not had their fair share of parliamentary time, and this review into learning disabilities mortality will be a matter of huge concern to them, their friends and their families. The Minister says that resources are going into the review. Will she confirm that a review will be allocated to everybody who has reported a death, and that the impact on access to care for people with learning disabilities from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds is being specifically considered?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to have much more discussions like this in this place because health inequalities need to be addressed and we need to be outspoken about them. The whole point of asking NHS England to commission this review is to think about how we address the most severe of these inequalities, which is when people die early or in a way that might have been preventable. We want to ensure that every single death of a person with a learning disability—whether or not people regard that it was preventable from the outset—is looked at very carefully. People should always have that reassurance, regardless of where they live and what kind of socioeconomic background they come from.
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Vaccinations are one of the best ways to protect health and reduce mortality, and I was pleased that the Government pledged to increase the uptake among people with learning disabilities. Will the Minister update the House as to what progress she is making with that Government pledge?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right that vaccinations are very important. We have introduced the annual health check for people with learning disabilities because it is an opportunity for them to have a one to one with their GP to check that all things such as vaccinations are up to date, but also to see whether there are any other long-term health issues that have not yet been spotted. I speak about this from an entirely selfish point of view because a dear friend of mine—my self-appointed best friend, who was one of my constituents—very sadly died last year from a form of cancer that would have been curable had her case been picked up earlier. That is why health checks for people with learning disabilities are vital.

Point of Order

1.55 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday’s news that the Government are drawing up secret contingency plans for a potential British Steel collapse will have come as a shock to thousands of British steelworkers, who have worked against the odds to defend the company’s future, and to many across the industry. Today 4,500 jobs are at risk, as well as thousands more across the supply chain. Mr Speaker, could you please advise me whether the Government have indicated that they will update the House on this urgent matter? If not, what advice can you give me to encourage them to do so?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I have had no indication that a statement is certain, but I have had an indication that a statement is very likely in the near future—that is to say, in a small number of days. It is not inconceivable that that could be tomorrow; I am not expecting or predicting that, but it could be. If not, I have every confidence that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will want to come to the House early next week on the assumption that he is in a position to provide meaningful information to the House.

The Secretary of State has been solicitous in his dealings with the Chair. I have been kept in the picture on this matter and I have judged it right to await a ministerial initiative at this stage. The Secretary of State is well informed about parliamentary processes, and has antennae that are attuned to the will of the House. If, therefore, nothing were forthcoming but the matter were of continuing concern to Members, they would seek to raise it in the House and I would be respectful of that wish. By one means or another, this matter will be aired in the Chamber within a few days. Of that, I am very confident. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Lady and to other colleagues who are interested in this matter.
Trade Union (Access to Workplaces)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.58 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove certain restrictions on trade unions conducting business in workplaces, and for connected purposes.

Article 11 of the European convention on human rights states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests”,

or her interests. At present, there are almost 6.5 million trade union members in the UK, making trade unions this country’s largest voluntary and democratic organisations. Trade unions are on the frontline every day, fighting poverty, inequality and injustice, and negotiating a better deal for working people. Their role has never been more critical than it is today, as in-work poverty is on the rise and zero-hours contracts are widespread. British workers face an uncertain and exploitative job market, while it is boom time for large multinational companies.

I have spoken to union officials who have been prohibited by companies like McDonald’s from efforts to unionise their workforce. Employees have been banned from visiting other McDonald’s stores. Union members from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union have recounted stories like that of Mohamed, a worker from north London, who was excited at the prospect of working alongside his colleagues to improve basic things at work, like getting his shifts 10 days in advance so that he can plan his life. Because of these efforts, he was informed by the management that he is banned from every McDonald’s store in the area. Union staff visiting McDonald’s across the UK to speak to workers about the benefits of joining a trade union are being routinely thrown out of stores and having their presence reported to senior regional managers.

Workers at Amazon have reported shift patterns being interrupted and randomised simply to prevent staff from talking to union officials on the way into work. In a members’ survey of workers conducted by the GMB, one Amazon worker described employment there as like “living in a prison”. The strict targets that are imposed on staff mean that 70% feel as though they are given disciplinary points unfairly, while 89% believe that they are being exploited. In its recently published report on InterContinental Hotels Group, Unite documented a culture of fear and bullying, with management pressurising low-paid staff into working for eight to 10 days straight. IHG employees and subcontracted employees have been routinely denied the right to freedom of association and have stood little chance of exercising their right to collective bargaining. Union members are vulnerable and live in fear of reprisals from their employer.

Bupa is one of largest and highest-profile providers of residential social care in the UK and part of an international health group that serves approximately 32 million customers in 190 countries. It consistently refuses to allow Unison officials access to workplaces to speak to staff and members regarding union rights and representation. During 2017 and 2018, Unison North West regional officers were banned from every Bupa workplace location, despite assurances that visits could be conducted at the employer’s convenience and with due regard to operational and safeguarding concerns and priorities. In a sector where shift work and long hours are prevalent, and where many care workers also have significant caring responsibilities at home, the workplace is often the only place for the union to engage with workers. Bupa’s denial of access in this case is effectively a refusal by the employer to allow workers to organise a union.

I could go on: I have heard countless stories like these from union officials. As long as these practices are widespread, this country’s commitment to the human right to form and to join a trade union is hollow and meaningless. Why are our democratic trade unions being treated in this way, and why is the human right to join and form trade unions being denied? In part, it is because under current legislation there are no rights of workplace access for trade unions. In the words of one IHG union member:

“In order to exercise our basic human right to freedom of association, workers in the UK need our employers to provide facility time and a space within our workplaces for reps and members to meet and discuss work related issues.”

This is not a far-fetched, unrealisable demand—it is achievable, and I hope that my Bill can achieve it.

In New Zealand, under its Employment Relations Amendment Act 2018, unions have far greater access to workplaces. Workers can speak to union reps visiting the sites. The company provides a space for the union and worker to meet and pays the worker for a reasonable amount of time with their union rep. This, in turn, leads to higher union membership, higher wages, and more just and fair workplaces. Trade unions in the workplace are normalised, leading to a less adverse attitude to working people’s right to represent themselves. Under this legislation, all that is required is that the union provides a short period of notice that they will be visiting the site, allowing management to add the extra staff member required for the duration of the visit. This means that there is no disruption to the business while ensuring that workers’ legal and human right to join and form a union is adhered to. New Zealand’s Employment Relations Amendment Act has restored protections for workers, especially vulnerable workers, and strengthened the role of collective bargaining in the workplace.

If we are to transition away from a low-wage, precarious economy, increasing the collective bargaining power of workers is critical. It is a myth that strong trade unions drive down profit—I emphasise that point. A happy, well-respected workforce is also a productive workforce. I know this from my own experience as a union rep at NatWest. Being able to represent and support my colleagues gave me a clear sense of the value of strong union representation in the workplace. My colleagues felt valued and supported, and as a result provided an efficient, professional service. That is what trade unions are all about: bringing people together to work towards a common goal. The stories I have heard from union officials paint the opposite picture: too many British workers feel exploited and dispensable. By expanding trade union access to workplaces, we can restore dignity
and respect at work, and put an end to the exploitation and misery we see on the rise today. We need strong trade unions and a better deal for working people.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Ordered,**

That Faisal Rashid, Laura Pidcock, Ian Lavery, Caroline Lucas, Grahame Morris, Chris Matheson, Ruth Smeeth, Justin Madders, Helen Goodman, Danielle Rowley and Angus Brendan MacNeil present the Bill.

Faisal Rashid accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 391).

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### Education

2.7 pm

**The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore):** I beg to move,

That the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.

It is a pleasure to have the chance to address the House today. I welcome the opportunity to debate these regulations, which are the final planned set related to the implementation of the higher education elements of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. To implement the research elements of the Act, there will be further regulations related to the closure of the research councils and the establishment of UKRI—United Kingdom Research and Innovation.

As I mentioned during last week’s debate in Committee on the Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019, we have made great progress since the Higher Education and Research Act, otherwise known as HERA, came into law in 2017.

You may recall, Mr Speaker, that HERA abolished the Higher Education Funding Council for England, otherwise known as HEFCE, and the director of fair access to higher education, more commonly known as the Office for Fair Access, or OFFA. A new regulator was created—the Office for Students, or the OfS—to oversee and monitor the activities, including in relation to fair access and participation, of English higher education providers that register with it. The OfS currently regulates registered HE providers under transitional arrangements, and we hope the new regulatory regime will be fully operational from August this year.

In addition to retaining existing HEFCE and OFFA functions for the transitional period, the OfS has gradually begun to exercise its functions under HERA. HERA gave the Office for Students the power to create a new single register of higher education providers. Registration with the OfS is the only route for providers to access student support funding through charging fees for courses that attract student loans. It is now a requirement for an institution to obtain degree-awarding powers or to obtain the right to call themselves a university. Since the formation of the Office for Students on 1 January 2018, it has registered more than 350 higher education providers—352 as of 13 May, to be precise—to exacting standards, including all English universities.

The HERA reforms to the system of regulating higher education were wide ranging, which means that a number of changes to the statute book are needed to reflect the reforms introduced and ensure the smooth running of existing legislation.

That brings us to why we are here today. The main purpose of the regulations before the House is to make consequential amendments to existing legislation—a standard procedure after any primary legislation has passed.

The majority of those amendments replace references to now defunct bodies or repealed legislation. They also reflect the diversification of HE providers and the wide range of providers that are registered with and regulated by the OfS. Further, they reflect the movement to a
formal regulatory system based on registration. Some of the cross-references in other enactments relate to the quasi-regulation of higher education institutions by HEFCE, and others to receipt of or eligibility for funding. The amendments reflect that nuance to preserve the original intention of such provisions.

The OfS assumed responsibility for determining applications for university title on 1 April this year. Before that date, applications were determined by the Privy Council. Transitional regulations were made to allow applications made before 31 March to be dealt with under the old system. Further provision is made in the regulations in relation to university title, to ensure that the consequential amendments they contain do not disturb applications already in process under the old regime.

The regulations also enable registered HE providers that are charities to become exempt from registration with, and direct regulation by, the Charity Commission. If a provider chooses to take advantage of that opportunity, the OfS will act as principal regulator for the provider, enabling it to avoid duplicative regulatory returns to both the Charity Commission and the OfS. HEFCE was formerly principal regulator for HEIs that it funded. A registered charity that does not wish to become exempt will not become exempt against its will; a provider must take action to obtain the exemption. This amendment is intended to create greater flexibility and choice for charitable bodies that are registered HE providers.

I am pleased to say that the regulations make the regulators code applicable to all the OfS’s regulatory functions, under section 24 of the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act 2006, fulfilling a commitment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) in 2017 during the passage of HERA. I know that he and the House will be pleased to see the progress made in that regard.

I thank my trusted ministerial colleagues for the assistance and collaboration of their Departments in establishing the consequential amendments required. In short, the regulations create the opportunity for more charitable bodies to become exempt from direct regulation by the Charity Commission; ensure that key enactments continue to work in the real world, minimising the risk of disruption and chaos; and put OfS compliance with the regulators code on a statutory footing.

I have highlighted the wide-ranging nature of the legislation affected by these amendments. If the amendments are not approved, it could have serious negative consequences for the HE sector. Among other things, it could result in: confusion around whether certain providers have to charge VAT on student fees; the Office for Students not being subject to the public sector equality duty; certain charities being unexpectedly faced with a change to their accounting rules, resulting in confusion and more paperwork and potentially affecting students and their overall experience; and students being denied their full entitlement to state benefits because of outdated references to defunct legislation.

This Government firmly believe that the higher education regulatory system must effectively protect the interests of students in the short, medium and long term. I hope Members will agree that the regulations are of the utmost importance to students and the sector alike and will approve them.

2.14 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his detailed explanation of this statutory instrument. He has stated—we do not intend radically to dispute the point—that the regulations largely make consequential amendments to existing primary legislation, to make it consistent with the objectives and content of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, in addition to the points he made about the Charities Act 2011. However, I am informed that the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee in the other place decided yesterday to defer consideration of the regulations for one week. Can the Minister shed some light on why his colleagues in the other place have decided to do so? It is rather puzzling.

The Higher Education and Research Act created a new regulatory framework for higher education in England, including a new regulator—the Office for Students—and a new register of higher education institutions, essentially creating a new legal category of “registered higher education provider”. That will now include institutions in the further education sector, and my own college, Blackpool and The Fylde College, will be one of the institutions to benefit from that.

The regulations amend existing primary legislation so that, where appropriate, it refers to registered higher education providers. That is not a contentious decision; it is a legal tidying-up exercise, following the creation of a new regulatory framework. However, as the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), pointed out on the Floor of the House and several times in Committee, the OfS, to which many of the powers are being transferred from HEFCE, is a very different bird, with a different remit and different powers. It is therefore reasonable that we look carefully at how these changes might have an impact on HE providers.

The regulations ensure that all registered higher education providers can use an existing legal opt-out of certain laws governing charities, so that they will instead be governed by the OfS. We remain concerned about the Government’s continued marketised view of the OfS. We continue to be critical of the wider regulatory regime underpinning the 2017 Act and the way in which it is being applied, in particular the extent to which the Government are forcing the operations of free markets into the higher education system, without any sense of the consequences, in a Bill that was put together before Brexit and takes no account of its consequences. Can the Minister confirm that the OfS will be the sole arbiter in those cases, rather than the Charity Commission?

The explanatory note to the regulations says:

“Part 4 (regulation 43) makes amendments to Schedule 3 to the Charities Act 2011 in relation to exempt charities that are regulated by the OfS as their Principal Regulator. The amendments enable any registered higher education provider that is a charity to become exempt by an Order in Council, and remove exempt charity status from a provider that ceases to be registered with the OfS.”

These are important and powerful instruments. On the final point, about removing exempt charity status from a provider that ceases to be registered with the OfS, how will that be actioned and followed up, and what mechanisms will be in place? How will those decisions thereafter be scrutinised?

Two years on from the Bill receiving Royal Assent, we are still tidying up the legislation that has come from it. The Minister said, no doubt with a sigh of relief, that
we are reaching the final set of regulations directly relating to the 2017 Act. However, as the former universities Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington—my opposite number during the Bill’s passage through the House—said in a Delegated Legislation Committee last week:

“It has been almost four years now that we have been at it.”—[Official Report, Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee, 8 May 2019; c.11.]

I have to confess that I have been at it on this legislation throughout that time, and the Minister may begin to feel that he too is becoming accustomed to being at it, because this is the third week in a row that he and I have debated regulations relating to the Act.

The Minister and I had a lively discussion last week on the Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019. It might not sound like the most fruitful possibility for a lively discussion, but we managed it. That gave Members on the Statutory Instrument Committee, including Government Members such as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Orpington, the ability to raise important questions about access and participation, adult and part-time learning, the status of the Office for Students and, importantly, the current progress of the Augar review, on which we are still waiting for an update from the Government. The Minister is very welcome to update the House today if he chooses to do so.

The week prior to that, we challenged the Government over a number of unanswered questions relating to the Higher Education (Registration Fees) (England) Regulations 2019, about which we and the universities sector have had a number of concerns, including the special arrangements for micro and new providers, the formula used to determine the cost of registration for providers and the alarming nature of how quickly the Government’s proposed contribution to this exercise has fallen. In particular, we were concerned that the Government were making new and extraordinarily bureaucratic and expensive demands on universities at a time when their future is uncertain, and that is why we voted against the regulations.

These naturally reflect on the motion that the Government have chosen to bring forward on the Floor of the House today. It is our belief that, in principle, this statutory instrument is not unduly contentious, and I am led to believe that that opinion is shared by the Government. Why, therefore, do they need to use the time of the full House, rather than a Delegated Legislation Committee, to attempt to rubber-stamp a series of consequential amendments and the other issues pertaining to the Charities Act? The reason really is that the Government were making new and extraordinarily bureaucratic and expensive demands on universities at a time when their future is uncertain, and that is why we voted against the regulations.

With these regulations, we are exhibiting potential issues with data sharing, as is attested by a briefing I received in advance of this debate from defenddigitalme. For the assistance of the House, defenddigitalme advocates for children’s privacy in data and digital rights, and in response to concerns from teachers, parents and campaigners about the invasive uses of children’s personal information collected in the course of their education in England. That is one of the issues that I now want to raise further with the Minister. On the effects of the new regulations, it has said to us:

“Over 25 million students, children, and staff across England’s Education sector will be denied control over their digital footprint, in perpetuity. Data will be copied to an indefinite number of data recipients, without clear safeguards for scope creep, of new or onward uses, or users...

There is no meaningful limitation in its existing powers for what purposes OIS may pass on personal data to third parties; nor for which purposes those third-parties in turn may use the data on the face of the Act…or in the 2018 Regulation no 607...

By giving the OIS—and potentially its own prescribed persons (third parties), access to the entire education dataset of the population, past and present, since 2002:

There is no oversight”—

as far as we can see—

“of its data handling or accountability for processing...
There is no published plan to inform each adult of the change of data controller or new processing purposes by any new body...

There is no route for redress if data are wrongly processed or mistakes made...

These are important issues. They may be quite technical issues, but they are important issues that bear upon the statutory instrument we are being asked to pass today, and they are issues that we took up during the Committee stage of the Bill.

The regulations bring both the OfS and UKRI on to the list of organisations in schedule 8 to the Digital Economy Act 2017, but there have been widespread concerns about data sharing between higher education providers and private companies. Is the Minister able to tell us today in what circumstances data will be shared and when students will know this has happened? As a point of process regarding part 2, regulation 14, on new powers under the Digital Economy Act 2017, can the Minister confirm whether the regulations have been prepared in line with parts 5.1 and 5.2 of the Cabinet Office debt and fraud information sharing review board code of practice, which was passed by this House in November? There does not appear to have been any publication or preparation of data protection impact assessments in relation to the documents accompanying this SI. Applications to amend the schedule should be made through the secretariat, but as we are told that the Cabinet Office committee does not publish any minutes it is unknown whether this happened. Will the Minister tell us why—in respect of the regulations before us today, which the Minister has signed off—his colleagues in the Cabinet Office do not publish minutes in this way?

Is it the intention of the new regulations that through the new data powers they give OfS to receive data in regulations 28 and 32 they can also enable the distribution by OfS of population-wide personal data? I repeat: that includes the personal, confidential data of every pupil from state education since 1996, past, present and future and in perpetuity—over 25 million people, and growing every year—distribution to its own third-party prescribed persons, including potentially Pearson Education Ltd, among other commercial parties, for such wide-ranging company purposes, through the powers of last year’s regulations, which set out who the OfS could give data to, and for purposes defined only by that company’s memorandum and articles of association, most of which were not even mentioned in the explanatory notes that accompanied that negative statutory instrument?

I would argue that if the Department wishes us to be entirely happy with this SI today, the necessary and proportionate purposes should be made explicit and set on the face of the Act, or corrected in each set of regulations. These are matters on which it would be helpful for the Minister to respond briefly now, or at least for him to put a response in writing for Members of the House, given that they have been raised on the Floor of the House today. We do not, though, propose to divide the House on this statutory instrument today.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am a trifle confused. The territorial extent of the regulations is described as across the UK, but in fact they contain not a lot, if anything, that affects Scotland. They do refer to UKRI, which is the amalgamation into one body of all the research funding councils across the UK, no work on which has actually been done by this Government since the amalgamation was announced in the 2017 Act. This will have a great and deleterious effect on Scotland and on Scottish universities. There is a worrying spectre facing the Scottish universities in regard to research funding, which will no longer come from Europe. Scotland has had more, some would say, than its fair share in population terms, but certainly not more than its fair share in excellence terms because of the research done in Scottish universities, quite often by EU nationals who have given a great boost to the Scottish university sector and who are welcome, and still welcome, in Scotland.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): That will affect not only Scottish universities but English universities, certainly in the midlands and in the Coventry area, where there are two universities. Those universities in Coventry and the midlands do a lot of research and development for Europe, and they sometimes rely on the expertise of employees coming from Europe. We cannot get a guarantee out of the Government that that expenditure will continue at present levels or increase beyond 2020. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is cause for concern for all universities in Scotland and in England?

Marion Fellows: I certainly do, but as the hon. Gentleman is aware, I have a particular interest in Scottish universities.

I thank the Minister—it was a bit bad of me not to thank him immediately—for his detailed explanation of the regulations and for the promise that more regulations will be brought forward on research. I gave him—I am sure he remembers it well—a 101 on Scottish universities education when he came to the Education Committee this morning. It was a pleasure to meet him and to listen to what he had to say, and I believe he has the interests of universities at large at heart. I hope he will take up my offer for him to look closely at what is being done in Scotland about funding and widening access, which we discussed this morning. However, I am going off the point and I do not wish to speak for long.

I share the puzzlement of the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). No one is against these regulations; they are technical and they will help to ensure that the 2017 Act makes sense after we leave—if we do—the European Union. My preferred option is to stay, of course. The regulations are really just technical, and I am baffled about why they have been brought to the Floor of the House but the Minister has not published the information on research funding that universities need now; that is almost teasing the whole university sector. Universities UK was very pleased because a successor to Horizon 2020 is moving forward, and we may, as a United Kingdom, be a third party and involved with that. Some of the best research done across the UK and across Europe has been the best precisely because it has been pan-European, not confined to the UK.
As has been mentioned in this place before, the Government’s proposals for tier 4 visas for students after three years in the UK will have a much greater impact in Scotland, where a standard degree is generally a four-year degree. That must be dealt with. It also affects those students who carry on, who want to do real and lasting research and want to stay in Scotland. The whole premise of tier 4 visas is to put off—it has already put off—researchers coming to the UK, to Scotland as well, and to make it much more difficult for universities to attract the right kind of research that they can build on and keep the UK in the forefront of research worldwide.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I strongly agree with the hon. Lady. Does she agree that the policy affects not only Scotland, where four-year courses are a norm, but courses such as engineering throughout the UK, where four-year courses are standard, and other courses where the master’s degree is required as the first degree that people get, because it is a four-year course, and because of the level of learning that is needed to reach that standard?

Marion Fellows: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have been a bit remiss. Medicine is affected as well; many degrees in England, as well as in Scotland, last longer than four years. The Government must take that issue seriously.

Can the Minister say when he will introduce further regulations under the 2017 Act? That is crucial to universities the length and breadth of the UK.

Chris Skidmore: I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate. I shall try to respond briefly to the points that have been raised.

I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for her remarks on the Scottish system. I will be heading to Scotland in early June and will endeavour to focus also on some of the issues of widening participation. I have regular meetings with the Scottish Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead. On the points that the hon. Lady raised about research, I know that we are going a bit off piste in relation to the statutory instrument before us, but I reiterate my commitment to ensuring that we continue to endeavour to have strong global research links.

Regarding our association with such future programmes as Horizon Europe, yesterday the Government published our international research and innovation strategy, making clear our commitment to being outward-facing and ensuring that we continue to endeavour to have strong global research links.

On tier 4 visas—the hon. Lady will be aware that the Home Secretary is sitting beside me—we must remember that researchers from international countries are still able to come to the United Kingdom. We recently launched the first Future Leaders Fellowships programme, £900 million of investment in 550 international fellowships, which has seen people from Japan to Canada coming to the UK. We recognise there are issues relating to visas that need to be looked at as part of the consultation for the immigration White Paper, but issues around tier 4 visas have not prevented existing international researchers from being able to participate in UK research life.

Turning to the points made by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), on the amendment to schedule 3 of the Charities Act 2011, which sets out that charities are exempt from registration with and direct regulation by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, HEFCE was the principal regulator for HE providers that were exempt charities under the existing schedule 3 of the 2011 Act, and the OfS was made principal regulator for higher education under the earlier consequential and transitional regulation which came into force on 1 April 2018. The amendments to schedule 3 require that currently exempt HE charities remain registered with the OfS to continue to hold exempt status and provide the opportunity for any provider registered with the OfS to be exempt by applying to the Privy Council. That will mean that exempt charities registered with HE providers will not have to register with or make returns with the Charity Commission, but will instead report to the OfS as principal regulator.

The amendments have been made with the intention to reduce the administrative and regulatory burden on charities and ensure that the OfS has a sufficient regulatory relationship with the relevant exempt charities to be an effective principal regulator. The amendment to the Charities Act made the removal of exempt status automatic upon deregistration, so no action is actually required by the OfS. The OfS can deregister a provider only if certain conditions are met. That covers both conditions on registration, and consideration of the denial of an access and participation plan.¹

On the impact assessment, the regulations contain two sets of saving provisions. The first deal with the applications made for university title that were made before 1 April 2019. The second type of saving provisions relate to the repeal of a particular statutory provision under which so-called designation orders were made. Those orders designated certain providers as higher education institutions. There are a number of references and regulations governing teachers’ pension schemes and local government schemes to designated institutions. If we do not preserve the orders for those very narrow purposes, future staff’s eligibility for the schemes will be lost, so there are benefits in ensuring that staff have access to those pension schemes.

The entire purpose of the consequential saving provisions is to preserve the intention and scope of the underlying legislation in the context of the changes brought about by HERA. We therefore do not anticipate any additional regulatory burden as a result of the regulations. As I said in my opening speech, the main purpose of the consequential amendments is to minimise the risk of chaos and disruption to students, staff and providers. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the SLSC asking for clarity on a few of the provisions in the regulations. I understand that it often does so as part of the scrutiny process and we will respond in due course.

The hon. Gentleman focused on the risks around data sharing in relation to regulation 14 and schedule 8 to the Digital Economy Act 2017. Schedule 8 allows bodies named in it to disclose information to each other for the purposes of taking action in connection with

¹[Official Report, 4 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 1MC.]
fraud perpetrated against a public authority. The amendments replace Innovate UK and existing research councils with references to UKRI, HEFCE and the OfS, because HEFCE has been abolished, and Innovate UK and the research councils have been incorporated into UKRI. If we do not make the amendment, the OfS will not be able to make or receive fraud-related disclosures envisaged under the Act. There would also be ambiguity as to whether disclosures could be made or received by relevant constituent parts of UKRI.

Separately, regulations 28 and 32 amend the Education (Information About Children in Alternative Provision) (England) Regulations 2007 and the Education (Individual Pupil Information) (Prescribed Persons) (England) Regulations 2009. The provision requires institutions that are not schools in receipt of funding from the Department for Education to provide certain pupil information to the Secretary of State and other bodies, including HEFCE. The amendment will substitute OfS for HEFCE, as HEFCE no longer exists. That is the same for regulation 32.1

It is important to state on record that we need data sharing to track pupils to ensure, when it comes to improving the position of disadvantaged students and students in widening participation categories, the data is available.

Gordon Marsden: I appreciate the detailed explanation of the technical reasons for the changes and I have no wish to prolong the debate unduly, but the thrust of my remarks was to express our continued concerns about the inadequacy of the protections in this area. Will the Minister give the House an assurance today that he is confident the status quo in terms of the safeguards will in fact do the business, given that we and other bodies have raised substantial concerns about the current procedures?

Chris Skidmore: The section 3 regulations the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his earlier contribution were debated at the time of the regulations. The consequential provisions substitute the OfS for HEFCE. I will put on record that the Department takes its obligations under data protection laws very seriously. There is a panel that assesses each sharing request for public benefit, proportionality, the legal underpinning, and strict information security standards. I reiterate that no data sharing will take place without the Department ensuring that those measures are taken into account.

That takes us to the wider issue of the OfS being part of the regulators code and the application of that code meeting the commitment the Government made during the passage of the Act. In addition to the matters the OfS must have to regard to under HERA are the five principles of good regulation under the regulators code. It is worth putting them on record: the regulator should carry out activities in a way that supports those it regulates to comply and grow; regulators should provide simple and straightforward ways to engage with those they regulate and hear their views; regulators should base their regulatory activities on risk; regulators should share information about compliance and risk; and regulators should ensure clear information, guidance and advice is available to help those they regulate to meet their responsibilities to comply. The opportunity for the OfS to be a part of the regulators code is an additional indication of the responsibilities that the OfS takes its new role very seriously.

If I had longer I would go through the importance of why we are debating the regulations. As Universities Minister, I am delighted they have reached the Floor of the House rather than Committee Corridor. I believe this marks a significant moment in the reforms that began way back with the first Green Paper in 2015, all the way through to the final provisions of the Act being put in place. We have seen a shift from a provider-focused system to a student-focused system. We have seen a system that will now move to focusing on how we can best ensure we have value for money for students and deliver the best student experience. We can ensure that new providers, including FE providers, are able to enter the market.

When addressing the Education Committee this morning, we spoke at length about how we can ensure that FE and HE providers have greater opportunities to work together. One important part of the regulations is ensuring that FE providers will be able to have degree-awarding powers and apply to a much more streamlined system through the OfS. My ambition and long-term hope is that it will allow FE providers to have degree-awarding powers, rather than going through the rather complex and nuanced current franchising route. That will ensure we create a single system for a post-18 education world that benefits students, so they understand their role in the education system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Resolved.

That Pete Wishart be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Stewart Hosie in pursuance of the House of Commons Administration Act 1978, as amended.—(Jo Churchill.)
Serious Violence

2.49 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of serious violence.

Serious violence is a national emergency that we are tackling head on. It is all too common to wake up to the heartbreaking story of slaughter on our streets. Like many parents, I fear for my children. I lie awake worrying when they go out, waiting to hear the key turn in the door, desperate to know that they are safe and back home. Tragically, for some, that moment of relief never comes. They never hear that welcome jangling of keys. Their children never come home. Many are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We are seeing an epidemic of senseless violence to which anyone can fall victim.

Since becoming Home Secretary, I have done everything in my power to help end the bloodshed. It has been my top priority, and we have responded to the crisis with urgent investment and additional powers, but, while lives are still being lost, it is clear that more must be done.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend watched any of Channel 5’s “Police Code Zero”? If he were to do so, he would share the frustration of so many of our constituents who write to us complaining about the leniency of sentences even for violent attacks on the police, notwithstanding the powers we have given to the courts to deal with that. Why will they not use them?

Sajid Javid: I have not yet had the opportunity to watch the programme to which my right hon. Friend referred, but I absolutely understand the issue he raised. It is important that we do everything we can to support our brave police officers. I and the Policing Minister have made a number of announcements in the past 12 months to do just that. We continue to work with police officers and their leaders across the country, including talking to frontline officers about what more we can do.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Serious violence is often—not always—caused by organised criminal groups. Does the Home Secretary share the head of the National Crime Agency’s assessment that, without more resources, we are in danger of losing the fight against organised crime?

Sajid Javid: I share the concerns around serious organised crime. I welcome the National Crime Agency’s national strategic assessment, which says that the cost of such crime to society is at least £37 billion a year. Clearly the work the NCA is doing with police forces around the country is vital. It is important that we continue to work together with the NCA and the police. It was welcome that this year we increased resources to the NCA to fight serious organised crime. We will certainly look at longer term resource need in the spending review.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have discussed this with the Policing Minister before: despite the increase in funds to recruit more policemen, funding is not sufficient. That is the message my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) referred to just a moment ago. Violent crime is increasing, particularly in places such as Coventry and other parts of the west midlands. The police have been reduced to firefighting in an area for two or three months, before the resource goes to another area. The vacuum is then filled by more crime. Can the Home Secretary not do a bit more about that?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will come to resourcing: both general police resourcing for all activities and resourcing dedicated to serious violence. He will also welcome that it is not just about resourcing: it is also about powers. I will talk about that in a moment, too.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Home Secretary will realise that, in the £2.1 billion ask, Lynne Owens also raised the role of the Border Force. As the Home Secretary and I have discussed, of the young offenders I have met who have been involved in a gang or who have used or carried a knife, many have no idea where Colombia is or about the trafficking of cocaine and where it comes from. It comes because there are adult gangsters organising that traffic through Amsterdam and Spain. Will he say a little more about the role of the Border Force, which he knows has also been subject to cuts during the austerity period?

Sajid Javid: Let me first take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done and continues to do to help fight serious violence, particularly that done on the Serious Violence Taskforce. From that, he will know that a number of issues have been and continue to be looked at. He is right to raise the issue about Border Force and drugs coming into the country. I understand that last year Border Force had a record haul of class A drugs. There is still more to do, but it is good to see that it is stopping more and more drugs reaching our shores.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Home Secretary is being generous with his time. This week at Killingholme docks a truck with £3 million worth of cocaine hidden in it was stopped and prevented from coming into the local area. I wonder how many trucks with that amount of drugs get through. He will be well aware that Grimsby suffers from a significant county lines issue. This week, a man was stabbed after drawing out money in the evening, presumably by people wanting drug money. So much in this area is scaring people in smaller towns such as Grimsby; it is not just in the big cities. Is he giving all the attention he could to areas such as Grimsby?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of county lines, which I will talk a bit more about in a moment. In the last few years, many towns like Grimsby across the UK have been seriously impacted by the growing county lines problem. The NCA has published more information on it. We estimate that there are probably at least 2,000 county lines. She is right to mention the problems that that is causing Grimsby and elsewhere. When I talk about these issues later, I hope she will see some of the action we are taking and the results coming about because of that.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way yet again; he is being most generous in giving way to both sides of the House. Does he agree that we also need to look at the oversight of police and crime commissioners and how they are spending and managing their money? For instance, in the west midlands the PCC has managed to accumulate £106 million in reserves, and there has been a record rise in the precept, yet he is closing and flogging off Solihull police station. Now we have real uncertainty about whether 160,000 people will have a police station that they can call local.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Whatever resources are available to police, the public expect them to be spent efficiently and used in a way that will ultimately help. He talks about the west midlands, which has one of the forces that is most affected by serious violence. I have met the force’s leaders a number of times. He is right to question whether funding is being spent properly and appropriately.

My eyes are open to the scale of the challenge. Last year, we saw the highest number of knife murders since records began. Already this year we have seen 30 fatal stabblings on the streets of London alone. These are stark figures, yes, of course, but to truly understand what they mean we must look beyond the statistics to the lives they represent. Over the last year I have made it my mission to understand the real impact of the rise in serious violence. I have met the families of victims and heard their harrowing stories; I have talked to youth workers, who try to turn people away from violence; and I have consulted our police, who are at the frontline of the battle against knife crime.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Home Secretary mentioned the 30 murders in the capital so far this year. Last autumn, two young men—one a 15-year-old child—lost their lives through stabblings in my constituency. Just a few weeks ago, a 15-year-old was seriously stabbed on their way home from school. He talks about meeting various people to discuss this problem, but the reality on the ground is that locally our youth services have been cut, our school budgets have been cut and our local government budgets have been cut, so the resources going in to tackle this serious violence are being diminished all the time. What does he have to say about that?

Sajid Javid: When I met the hon. Lady, we had the opportunity to discuss these issues, and I hope she will allow me to progress through my remarks and answer precisely that question.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Members of the Youth Parliament representing Central Bedfordshire are campaigning to make young people aware that a person is in much more danger if they carry a knife. It does not protect them. How can the Government help these excellent Members of the Youth Parliament get the message out to other people that they are much less safe if they stupidly carry a knife?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One way the Government are trying to get that message out is through the #knifefree campaign, which I will come to in a moment.

From having all these conversations and meeting people, including the families of victims of knife crime, one message is loud and clear: there is no one single solution to stopping serious violence. To tackle it properly will require action on many fronts and joined-up action across Government. With our serious violence strategy, we are fighting on all fronts with all partners to try to stop this senseless violence. Our united approach is starting to see some progress. National crime statistics for the last year show that the rate of rise in knife crime is starting to slow. The most recent figures from the Metropolitan police show a fall in the number of homicides in the past 12 months, and the number of knife injuries among under-25s fell by 15% in the capital, with over 300 fewer young people being stabbed, but still far too many lives are being lost and I remain resolute in my mission to help end the bloodshed.

Allow me Mr Speaker, to update the House on some of the work that is already under way. First, we are empowering police to respond to serious violence. I have joined anti-knife crime patrols and met senior officers from the worst-affected areas. They are the experts, so I have listened to what they say they need. They told me they needed more resources, so we have increased police funding by almost £1 billion this year, including council tax. As a result, police and crime commissioners are already planning to recruit about 3,500 extra officers and police staff.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister told me at Prime Minister’s Question Time last week that £1 billion was going back in, after she had cut 21,000 officers. In Ealing, Acton and Chiswick, where the number of aggravated burglaries and muggings has rocketed, how many officers will we have at the end of this year, compared with the number now? If they like, the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister would be welcome to visit; senior officers in Ealing and Acton would be happy to host them. We have lost both our police counters, but we would be happy to sit down and thrash this out. Our door is always open.

Sajid Javid: My understanding is that this year the Met plan to hire at least 300 additional officers. I cannot tell her how many there will be in Ealing, because that will be an operational decision for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, but that increase can take place because of the rise in funding—the largest cash increase since 2010.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In my constituency, we are seeing stabblings on a weekly basis. It is difficult to find exact numbers, but both boroughs that I cover—Redbridge and Waltham Forest—have lost about 200 officers each. How will the increase the Home Secretary is talking about plug the gap left by so many officers leaving the service?

Sajid Javid: One thing that will certainly help in our capital is the violent crime taskforce, which is dedicated to fighting violent crime in London, as well as other measures that I will come to in a moment—for example, the resourcing specifically for fighting serious violence, in the Metropolitan region and elsewhere, including new police officers specifically dedicated to that fight.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for what he has just said, but I would like some clarification. He said the increase was the
biggest since 2010. Will he confirm that it is the only increase since 2010 and that the figure has otherwise been cut each year since I was Policing Minister in 2010?

Sajid Javid: It is not the only increase. In the previous year, I think it was around £460 million—something over £400 million, anyway—and this is double what it was the previous year, so I cannot confirm that because it is not correct.

The police also told me they needed more powers, so we are changing the law through the Offensive Weapons Bill, which is expected to gain Royal Assent tomorrow. The Bill will make it harder for young people to buy knives or acid and will introduce the knife crime protection orders that police asked for. They also told me they needed urgent support to deal with the immediate challenge. They asked for £50 million, but I doubled it to £100 million, with two thirds going straight to the police. Last week, I announced that £63.4 million of that had been allocated to the 18 worst-affected forces. It will pay for surge activity and additional patrols. A further £1.6 million will help to improve the quality of data to support planning and operations, with the remaining £35 million being used to support the creation of violence reduction units.

The police also told me they wanted targeted stop-and-search—because it works. The Met Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has linked its increased use in hotspot areas to the fall in youth stabbings. For that reason, I have made it simpler for the police to use these powers by relaxing the rules on section 60 searches in seven of the worst-hit areas. At least 3,000 more officers can now authorise searches in areas where violence is anticipated, which will help to take more weapons off our streets.

Last year alone, police in England and Wales made nearly 8,000 arrests for possession of weapons and firearms following a stop-and-search, so it undoubtedly works, but we will continue to work with the police and communities to ensure its use remains targeted and intelligence-led. Of course, officers should never search people based on their race or ethnicity. This is not about any specific community; it is about protecting those most at risk. A black person is four times more likely to be a victim of homicide than a white person. In London, 53% of knife crime victims are from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background. If the targeted use of stop-and-search can save one of these victims, it can only be a good thing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am concerned about the impact on the community of the police’s increased ability to use section 60 and how innocent black young boys will be affected. I worry whether young people will feel encouraged to go to the police for protection and support if they feel victimised by them because of a blanket section 60 stop-and-search.

Sajid Javid: I understand why the hon. Lady raises this point, but she might be interested to know that the increase in stop-and-search in London in the last year has resulted in very few complaints, and one reason is the increased use of body-worn cameras. Police forces across the country are telling me that thanks to digital technology and evidence gathering they are seeing very few complaints about stop-and-search, especially compared with the levels of the past. She was right to mention innocent young black men—I think that was the phrase she used—but the increase is saving their lives. No innocent young person, no matter who they are or what their colour or background, should be faced with serious violence on our streets. Stop-and-search saves lives. That is why it is being used.

Secondly, we are investing in our young people’s future. Yes, a tough law enforcement response is essential, but by the time the police are called the damage is often already done. To save more lives, we must stop the violence before it starts by helping young people to avoid a life of crime. Giving teenagers more opportunities can transform their lives. I saw that at first hand last week—just a few days ago—when I visited a new OnSide youth zone in Dagenham. That is why we are investing £220 million in early intervention work, the largest investment of this type that we have ever made. Last month I announced that our £200 million youth endowment fund would be run by a charity called Impetus. The 10-year programme will deliver long-term help to those who are most in need, and young people will soon start to benefit, as the first funding round is expected to be launched shortly. The £22 million early youth intervention fund has already supported 29 projects.

I would like to thank the Victims Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). She is unable to join us at the moment, because she is chairing a roundtable on migrant workers and domestic abuse, but she will be here later.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): An analysis of the Government’s funding programmes, produced for the Home Affairs Committee, points out that the programmes for youth investment are spread over 10 years. If the Home Secretary looks at the annual funding and adds together the early intervention fund, the trusted relationships fund, the youth endowment fund and the communities and local government fund, he will see that—according to my calculation—the total is only £35 million a year, and that is set against a £760 million cut in youth services. Can he tell me whether those figures are correct?

Sajid Javid: A number of providers of those programmes with whom we have already worked have said that one thing they value deeply is certainty of funding. If the funding is not confirmed and people have to wait year by year, an endowment fund that provides security for up to 10 years can make a big difference to the delivery of services.

I have talked about intervention programmes in the Home Office, but cross-Government work, about which I shall say more shortly, means that there are a number of programmes that aim for similar outcomes resulting from early intervention and efforts to prevent young people from turning to a life of crime in the first place. For example, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has a troubled families programme, and has focused on knife-related crime. Work has also been done by, for instance, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice.

Yvette Cooper: I appreciate what the Home Secretary has said about certainty. However, I included many of those other cross-Government programmes in my calculation, and I came up with the figure of £35 million a year—and that is only 5% of the scale of the cuts in
youth services. Can the Home Secretary tell me how many young people will be reached by the programmes that he has announced, and how many placements have been lost as a result of the cuts in the youth service? Knowing those basic facts about how many young people we are reaching and how many we are not reaching is crucial to our ability to assess whether his strategy will work.

Sajid Javid: What I am talking about specifically is targeted youth intervention to stop young people turning to crime, in this instance serious violence. The right hon. Lady was, I think, referring to youth services more broadly, perhaps those provided by local councils, which are more universal in nature. My focus is much more targeted. As I said a moment ago, I went to see the OnSide youth zone project in Dagenham, which is supported by the local authority and others. That is a much more universal project. I welcome that kind of work as well, but I am not sure that we are comparing like with like when we talk about universal versus targeted services.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If we do not engage with young people in the first place, how can we target them? I have seen the amazing work that youth services do in my constituency. I have particular praise for Llanrumney Phoenix boxing club and Tiger Bay boxing club, which are doing brilliant work with youth services and partners across the piece. They are also working with South Wales police, helping hundreds of young people in my constituency.

However, the facts are exactly as they were presented by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). Between 2012 and 2016, 600 youth centres have been closed, 139,000 places have been lost, and £670 million has been cut from youth service budgets. Half the youth service in London has been lost under the Home Secretary’s governance. How on earth will the little pot of money that he has announced offset that huge cut, and that huge lack of engagement with young people?

Sajid Javid: I do not think that this is a small pot of funding. I have referred to the £200 million that is targeted at early intervention, and I think that will make a difference. For example, I am supporting Redthread, whose work in trauma units in hospitals will be extended to London, Birmingham and other places.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): We have lost 3,600 youth workers, along with the places mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). We have also lost nearly 7,000 of the community support officers who play such an important role in preventing crime. Is the Home Secretary aware that the National Citizen Service, a flagship Government-funded programme initiated by the former Prime Minister, sucks up most of the youth service budget? I am not denigrating its work—it does good work—but some of its spending is deeply concerning, such as the £10 million spent on a rebranding exercise, which could have been spent on tackling youth crime.

Sajid Javid: The National Citizen Service does some very important work. We should recognise the way in which it helps young people by giving them activities, bringing them together and, potentially, turning them away from what could be a difficult life involving crime. As I said earlier, the early intervention youth fund is already supporting 29 projects across England and Wales, and it is estimated that by the end of March 2020 it will have helped at least 60,000 children and young people. I think that demonstrates its reach.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I appreciate the efforts the Home Secretary is making in describing the wonderful work that a very few limited projects are doing, but I would suggest that they benefit—and I am sure that they do benefit—a relatively small number of young people.

When I was lead member for children and youth services in Hounslow about 12 years ago, I was told by young people, including so-called vulnerable young people, that they appreciated the good, specialist work that youth workers and others were doing with them, but they did not want to go into a facility with other young people and be labelled vulnerable. They wanted to participate in a universal youth facility, to be seen as part of the crowd, and perhaps to do some specific work, as and when, with those specialist workers. Effectively, the only youth work that is currently being done is for those so-called vulnerable young people. They feel labelled and separated from others, because the universal provision has all but disappeared in most of our local authorities.

Sajid Javid: I am afraid it is simply not the case that the only funding that is being provided is for—to use the hon. Lady’s words—vulnerable young people. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) mentioned the National Citizen Service. That is open to everyone. A moment ago, I referred to the onside youth zones, including the £5 million youth centre that has just opened in Dagenham and is supported partly by taxpayers’ money. It too is open to everyone, and I suggest that the hon. Lady go and take a look. I think that she will see all types of young people there.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): OnSide is setting up 100 youth zones. They are not youth centres, because they are trying to do something different, and to be a bit more welcoming to younger people rather than using the traditional and somewhat tired format. It is interesting to note that where those zones have been opened, youth-related crime has fallen by 50%. Does that not also demonstrate that there is a role for those who look at things differently?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point. The first OnSide youth zone was in Bolton. He is right about the fall in crime and the positive impact that that has had on the community. The new youth zone I mentioned in Dagenham is just opening, but I was incredibly impressed by what I saw last week, because it is open to all young people from the age of 11 to 18, and because it can make a difference with the hours that it is open and the facilities that are there. Again, it is a universal youth service available to everyone, with all sorts of activities, so I agree with his comments.
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have come slightly late to the debate. I opened several OnSide youth centres, but I also think it is a shame that we have lost some good youth facilities. The trouble was that the youth service was too much of a nine-to-five service for the convenience of people who worked in it, rather than of the kids whom we desperately needed to engage. OnSide makes a difference because it is a partnership between local authority youth services, children’s charities and business, and because it provides a variety of services at a variety of times to a large variety of children. It is a great model and we need more such models.

Sajid Javid: Let me take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for his work as a children’s Minister. He speaks with experience. He is absolutely right to talk about the model that OnSide represents. It is a vital partnership between local authorities, and therefore tax payers, and people in the local community, including local businesses and local benefactors. In many cases, they have come from that community and have a stake in it, so they want improvements to be made. It is exactly the kind of model that has a strong future.

Ruth Cadbury: I appreciate the effectiveness of the work of universal youth services, such as OnSide, but unfortunately they are few and far between. OnSide presented its proposal for Hammersmith, and I asked whether my constituents would be able to attend. It said, “Ah, no—it’ll only be for young people who live in Hammersmith.” Surely the Home Secretary is saying that we need something of the scale of OnSide in every community so that every young person can go to one nearby. Is that not about reinserting the funding for universal youth provision in every community, which has been cut by such devastating amounts, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee said?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady that I want more of those types of youth facilities in more communities. The action we are taking by working with our partners is a great model and we need more such models.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Home Secretary give way one more time?

Sajid Javid: I must make some progress. We also continue to refresh our national media campaign, which I referred to earlier. The #knife-free campaign warns young people about the dangers of carrying a knife.

I want to highlight a third action, which is the multi-agency public health approach, and how it can help to tackle violent crime. It involves all parts of the public sector working together to stop serious violence. To make that happen, we are consulting on a new legal duty to ensure that every agency plays its part. Our teachers, nurses and social workers already work tirelessly to protect our children. It is not about asking them to do any more, because they already do so much; it is about giving them the support and the confidence they need to report their concerns, safe in the knowledge that everyone will close ranks to protect that child. It is also about ensuring that all agencies share information to ensure that no one slips through the cracks. To support the multi-agency approach, we are investing £35 million in new violence reduction units to bring local partners together in hotspots. Work is under way to finalise those plans; I hope to provide an update on the proposals in the coming weeks.

Finally, we are investigating the root causes of violence so we can tackle the problem at source. We know that social media plays a part, with gangs trading weapons and taunting each other online. Our new “Online Harms White Paper” sets out our expectations for internet companies to do more. Later this month, the Met will launch a new social media hub to enhance our response.

The changing drugs market and the growth of county lines gangs is another key factor. The National Crime Agency estimates that there are about 2,000 active county lines fuelling serious violence. Last September, we set up the national county lines co-ordination centre. It is already showing results, with more than 1,100 people arrested and more than 1,300 people safeguarded following national intensification weeks.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that one way to gain intelligence and to detect county lines, gangs or vulnerable people and children is to have school police officers? Why, therefore, do only half the secondary schools in my constituency have a school police officer? They are not regarded as the priority, because the Met cannot recruit enough officers for the numbers leaving or the numbers it is being reduced by.

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned earlier, the number of officers in the Met and in most other forces is increasing; it is not being reduced. How those officers are deployed is clearly an operational decision. It is for the police to decide how best to use those officers. While I absolutely see the benefit of school police officers, it is right that that decision is not made by Ministers or by Parliament, but is based on the operational needs in the area. I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the increase in police officer numbers, including in the Metropolitan area.

To understand the issue of drugs further, I have appointed Dame Carol Black to conduct an independent review of drugs misuse. She will examine what the market looks like, the harms it causes and what more we might do to combat drugs.

Mr Lammy: Will the Home Secretary clarify whether in the terms of reference for Dame Carol Black he has specifically ruled out decriminalisation or legalisation from the scope of the review?

Sajid Javid: Yes, it has been ruled out. The Home Office is looking at how data can help us understand some of the pathways into crime. We will develop proposals for a new crime prevention data lab to bring together information and enhance our ability to make more targeted interventions.

The Government are all too aware of the devastating impact—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Home Secretary give way on the data point?

Sajid Javid: I will.

Yvette Cooper: I may have missed it, but I do not think I have heard the Home Secretary refer to the public health approach. Will he confirm whether that is still the approach of the Home Office, because it is welcome? The definition of a public health approach
states that it should be focused on a “defined population”. He will be aware that when the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), was before the Select Committee she was not able to tell us what the Home Office’s assessment was of the number of young people at risk of being drawn into crime. Does he now have that assessment, and can he tell us how many people live in the high-risk areas—the hotspots—he has identified?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely give the right hon. Lady a sense of that. I did mention the public health approach, but I am happy to confirm again that the Government are absolutely going ahead with it. The consultation is going on at the moment, and I hope that when the proposals come to the Floor of the House they will get cross-party support.

The right hon. Lady asked how many people might be at risk. Our serious violence strategy has already set out the risk and protective factors that can increase the likelihood of a young person becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence.

There is a range of numbers, depending on where someone comes from and what risk factors we are looking at. For example, the Children’s Commissioner estimates that 27,000 children are at risk of gang involvement, and 7,720 pupils were permanently excluded from school in 2016-17. It is estimated that almost 500,000 children live in low-income households.

It is important not to oversimplify this when we look at the risk group. Evidence suggests that those with multiple risk factors are most at risk. Equally, young people with certain risk factors never commit or become a victim of any crime at all. This is a complex area, and the right hon. Lady is right to ask about it. I would be happy to write to her with a bit more information, but I hope that what I have shared with her has been helpful.

I want to refer briefly to the Prime Minister’s serious youth violence summit, which she set up to explore the public health approach further. I joined her at the opening session, which brought experts, politicians, young people and community workers together to tackle the issue. The four-day summit saw real results, including the creation of a new PM-chaired ministerial taskforce, which met for the first time last Wednesday. This will drive forward work across Government, supported by a new Cabinet Office team to help to deliver key actions. Alongside this, I will continue to chair our serious violence taskforce, which has met nine times over the past year, with members including the Met Commissioner and the Mayor of London. The taskforce will complement the work of the PM-led group, providing fresh ideas and external challenge as we unite against serious violence.

We are acting on every level to try to stop the senseless violence. It is my duty as Home Secretary to keep our streets safe, and serious violence is a threat that I refuse to ignore. Much has already been done, but we cannot fix this problem overnight. It is vital that we remain united against this deadly threat. Every child deserves a better future and the freedom to live without fear, and we must deliver. I commend this motion to the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington): This is a very important subject, and it is at the forefront of many of our constituents’ minds. The House respects the fact that the Home Secretary chose to open this debate himself, even though we may not agree with some of his conclusions. Up and down the country, communities are haunted by the fear of the rising tide of violent crime. This is happening in metropolitan areas such as London and Birmingham, as well as in cities such as Grimsby. The fear and the concern are universal. Generations ago, young men solved their disputes with their fists. Nowadays, the same disputes—even the same criminal interactions—are settled with guns and knives.

The fear in the communities is threefold. First, there is the threat to yourself. We heard earlier about the tragic death of a man in Anglesey who was killed by a crossbow, and we hope that the Home Secretary will look into the regulations on crossbows. Secondly, there is the fear that your child could be the victim of violent crime. As a long-standing east end MP, I have sat with too many mothers who had said goodbye to their son in the morning as they saw him off to school or college, only to get a call from the emergency services later telling them that their son was dead. When you have sat with so many of those mothers, you understand how harrowing violent crime is for our communities. Thirdly, there is the fear that your child could be a perpetrator. It can be almost as traumatising to discover that your child is involved in violent crime as it is to find that they have been a victim. It is almost inevitable that there will be more deaths from violent crime this weekend in one or another of our great cities.

I have to begin by talking about the effect of the Government’s policies in the round. Violent crime does not happen in a policy vacuum, and the Opposition contend that the Government’s austerity policy has contributed to the causes of increased crime in almost every conceivable way. That is one reason why the Government have presided over a rise in violent crime. Ministers cannot be right in saying that the rise in violent crime is all down to better recording. If someone is a victim of violent crime, that is one crime that they will report and that will be recorded.

We have heard about some of the extra money being spent on different initiatives, particularly the £22 million for the early intervention youth fund. However, as Opposition Members have said, that does not begin to offset the cuts in youth services up and down the country. I stress to Ministers that it is not a choice between targeted intervention and a properly funded general youth service: we need both. If the money goes into just targeted interventions, the danger is that those young people feel stigmatised and do not want to engage. Ministers talk as if, on any given estate, a couple of guys are on the verge of committing some terrible violent atrocity, and for all the other young men on that estate, everything is just fine.

In our communities, on our estates and in other communities, young people need a properly resourced general youth service, not just because someone is on the verge of committing a criminal atrocity, but because, frankly, in the 21st century, with that huge, young, broken nuclear family and many mothers out of work who might not choose to be out of work, many young
men—and women—need to interact with role models, particularly male role models. That is what the youth service offers. It is not just a question of dragging somebody from the brink of violent crime.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I speak as a former Connexions manager. The Government have cut £880 million from youth support services. Those cuts have consequences. They come on top of the several hundred million pounds cut from public health—the Secretary of State spoke about a public health approach—and the loss of 21,000 police officers, 7,000 police community support officers and 15,000 police staff. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those cuts have consequences?

Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important intervention. I will return to the question of cuts having consequences later.

Huw Merriman: I sense that the shadow Home Secretary will not agree with me, but to try to take the party politics out of the discussion, it is worth considering that back in 2008, when there was no austerity, there were 272 knife-crime-related homicides—too many. Last year, there were 285—too many. By 2015, when the right hon. Lady could argue that austerity was at its peak, there were 281. Does she agree that this is not even a political choice for the vast majority of their lives outside school, youth services have been cut by 85%. This Government said they would not agree with me, but to try to take the party

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and this is not just an issue for councils of a particular political colour. Austerity is hitting the ability of councils of all political colours to deliver the services we need to effectively combat violent crime.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend is making a strong, powerful speech, and I agree that this goes well beyond party politics. It is about our communities and the challenges faced by the young people who live in them. My dad was a youth worker for many years in Cardiff, and he trained youth workers across the city. I have three local councillors who were fantastic youth workers in my community, and the one thing I hear from all of them is that because young people spend the vast majority of their lives outside school, youth services are even more important.

Why do we not consider making youth services statutory? Instead of them being a Cinderella service that is always cut, always slashed and always bearing the brunt of austerity, with devastating consequences for young people's lives and opportunities, we should start taking them seriously and provide a serious youth service for all young people.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Detection is obviously essential, as is getting weapons out of circulation. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner says she is in favour of stop-and-search as a means of getting those weapons out of circulation. Does the right hon. Lady back that call?

Ms Abbott: Absolutely. I have always argued that evidence-based stop-and-search has an important role to play. The Opposition fully support targeted, evidence-based stop-and-search. What has proved problematic in the past is non-evidence-based, random stop-and-search. I accept that one thing that has helped in the use of stop-and-search, as the Home Secretary says, is body-worn cameras, which minimise accusations on either side—by the person who has been stopped and searched or by the police officer. Evidence-based stop-and-search is a good thing; random stop-and-search has a very chequered history of exacerbating community tensions.

Janet Daby: Does my right hon. Friend agree that some families and young people do not complain about stop-and-search, or indeed about police behaviour, for fear of reprisals? I would have thought the Home Secretary would be aware of that.
Ms Abbott: Sadly, there are still tensions in many of our communities between young people and the police. Those tensions will be easier to deal with when we have the right levels of police funding and the right number of police officers. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend is correct when she says there are young people who do not necessarily report the injustices they think they have experienced.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The shadow Home Secretary talked about the right levels of police funding and police officers. Can she tell me what the right level of funding is, given that she voted against this Government’s increase in funding to the police?

Ms Abbott: People should stop using that old Whips Office line. The reason we voted against the Government’s proposal on funding was that we did not think it was enough money. Hopefully, nobody will raise that point again.

Government austerity has contributed to increases in the factors underlying the causes of serious violent crime, undermined prevention and cut police numbers, so there are inevitably fewer arrests and convictions. Ministers and other Members will say that the Government have recently increased spending on the police. In real terms, if we take away the precept, and once the cost of police pensions is taken—[Interruption.] We are talking about central Government funding. The problem with the precept, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) will perhaps explain to Conservative Members, is that it inevitably falls more heavily on poorer areas than on wealthier areas. We are saying that the claims about increased spending are not as impressive as they might seem, once we take away the cost of police pensions, which had to be met, and once we realise that much of that increased spending actually comes from the precept rather than central Government spending. In any event, this is a sticking plaster on a gaping wound—a wound inflicted by the Government’s own cuts.

The National Audit Office, which I hope will not be accused of being party political, has previously shown that central Government funding for the police has been cut in real terms since 2010. Offensive Weapons Bills and knife crime orders are one thing, but communities also need actual police officers in place to make use of those new legislative options.

It should be clear that Ministers are in danger of being party political, has previously shown that central Government funding for the police has been cut in real terms since 2010. Offensive Weapons Bills and knife crime orders are one thing, but communities also need actual police officers in place to make use of those new legislative options.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my right hon. Friend for being generous in giving way. She is talking about the underfunding of specific forces. Does she share my concern that, as in the case of South Wales police, and particularly of Cardiff, as a capital city, which has particular challenges because it is a seat of government, hosts major events and so on, there is often a real knock-on effect on our community policing, which amplifies the effect of the cuts? That is despite the strong efforts of South Wales police, which has been arguing with the Home Office for months and months now for some additional funding for Cardiff’s capital city responsibilities to free up the capacity of community policing to deal with serious violence on our streets.

Ms Abbott: I visited Cardiff last year, and the senior police officers and the police and crime commissioner put to me the case for more funding. That case is well made. On the question of knife crime, as of March 2011—not long after the coalition Government took office—there were 30,600 offences with a knife or sharp instrument; by 2018, that total had reached more than 40,800. That is a rise of nearly a third. In the latest year, there was a 12% increase in homicide, even if we exclude the cowardly terrorist attacks in Manchester and London. It is an appalling record; it is actually shameful. Government cuts have consequences. The Home Office’s own data shows that almost half of all crimes are closed with no suspect identified. In the past year, the proportion of summonses or charges fell from 11% to 9%. That means a reduction of summonses and/or charges in 41,000 individual cases. Police strength does have an impact in the fight against crime. Cuts do have consequences.

I have long taken an interest in disorder and crime—since long before I had the honour to represent my party on home affairs from the Front Bench—and my view on serious violence is, as with all policy matters, that we should focus on what works. From the inception of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow, we have seen a system that works: homicides due to knife crime in Glasgow have plummeted. We welcome the £80 million that the Chancellor has provided in funds for the new violence reduction units—it is a policy that we have long advocated on the Opposition Benches and we are pleased that the Home Secretary is copying the Labour party—but violence reduction units alone are not enough.
The Glasgow violence reduction unit was established when public spending was rising under Labour. The allocation of the latest funds takes place as austerity still rules. That means that poverty and inequality will continue to rise, as will zero-hours contracts, no proper apprenticeships and the burden of student debt. Pupils continue to be excluded, and find themselves in pupil referral units. The Government have a failed drugs policy combined with police cuts. We argue that the underlying causes of crime, and the opportunities for crime, are rising, and the prospect of criminals being caught are falling. More money for violence reduction units is welcome, but while austerity continues, they are unlikely to be as successful as they could be. As money is trickled into violence reduction units, the Government have carved a big hole in the bottom of the bucket with austerity.

When it comes to law and order, the Government cannot take with one hand, with the big cuts in local authorities, and give with the other, through individual pots of money for things such as violence reduction units and the youth endowment fund. Those individual pots of money do not begin to compensate for nearly a decade of cuts to policing, to youth services and to mental health services for young people and adolescents, and Ministers should not pretend that they do. All the summits, the committees, the reviews, the new legislation and even a new statutory duty cannot compensate for an overall lack of resources.

As for the public health approach, in her evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, Chief Constable Sara Thornton stressed the importance of strong drive, co-ordination and a concerted approach, if the public health approach was to succeed in England. Chief Constable Dave Thompson of the West Midlands police pointed out that, although the Home Secretary’s strategy alludes to a public health-based approach, it is not yet a public health-based strategy. There is next to no mention of violence in Public Health England documentation, including in Public Health England’s outcomes document. I understand that there is a consultation going on, but people will not take this Government seriously on a public health approach until that begins to be reflected in the actual practice and the actual close working between Public Health England, education and the NHS.

Violent crime haunts our communities. We argue that it is not just a failure of individual boys, young men and, increasingly, women, but an overall failure of Government policy, and it is partly caused by austerity. When it comes to violent crime, words are easy, but providing the proper resources and taking the right actions are difficult. I argue that, as we move into a weekend where, inevitably, we will hear about more violent crime and more knife crime, it is well past time that the Government left behind words, good intention and pots of money and showed genuine intent and provided the genuine level of resources that are needed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. In respect of the question relating to the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations, the Ayes were 294 and the Noes were 184, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]
trying to stop this epidemic. It is almost as if my town exists because of a sea of volunteering—it is awash with volunteers. Yet in Solihull, too often all we get from the police and crime commissioner is excuses. I know from speaking to people on the doorstep that local residents are deeply concerned by persistent rounds of cuts to local frontline policing, and they do not understand how the PCC justifies it while sitting on enormous cash reserves of, as I understand it, over £100 million.

People are also furious at the decision to sell off our town’s last police station, with no commitment that the money raised will be reinvested directly in policing in the town. I urge the Minister once again to reconsider that decision, especially in the light of the promises made to the people of Solihull during the closure of Shirley police station only a few years ago. Just to put this into context, 160,000 people face direct uncertainty over the future of policing provision in their borough. I understand that the site itself is potentially very valuable, and that it is frankly not as well used as it once was. I have also been given assurances by the chief constable that there is an intention to effectively migrate services to another front desk in the constituency, particularly in the town centre. However, the reality is that the services in the main police station have been wound down over time. That is key when it comes to intelligence, which is vital in combating knife crime and serious violent crime. I hope that this speech will be a further message to the police and crime commissioner, the authorities and the town of Solihull that we need a guarantee of a police station in Solihull to combat the rising tide of serious violent crime, which unfortunately seems to be coming over the border from Birmingham.

The concentration of police resources in Birmingham has continued despite the Government providing a funding boost to the West Midlands police. One of my constituents’ biggest fears about devolution was the risk of seeing Solihull overshadowed by Birmingham, and it is difficult to argue that that is not the case given the actions of the PCC, who is taking police resources from Solihull and placing them in Birmingham. My constituents are doing what they can to plug the gap, with groups such as Shirley Street Watch bringing residents together and giving them a chance to make a difference, but they cannot hope to compensate for the sale and potential closure of all on-the-ground police bases in Solihull. The serious violence strategy will be seriously undermined if the police and crime commissioner does not reconsider his policies and listen to the people of Solihull.

4.3 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As we have heard in the contributions so far, serious violence is always an emotive subject for the public and for Members of this House. Sadly, given the recent knife crime epidemic in London and many other parts of England, it is an issue that we have had to discuss far too often in recent times. Of course, the adoption of the public health model to tackle serious violence in Glasgow and Scotland is not news to Members—indeed, it has already come up in this debate—but thanks to Police Scotland and the work of the violence reduction unit, levels of non-sexual violent crime have reduced significantly in Scotland, and the approach has been welcomed and advocated by the World Health Organisation. That reduction has been most apparent in west and central Scotland, and in Scotland's cities more generally. Glasgow used to be known as the murder capital of Europe, yet it is now one of the safer cities in these islands. But despite this undoubted success, there is still a long, long way to go, and the Scottish Government are committed to tackling violent crime head-on, whatever form that takes.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It appears that the Home Secretary may be leaving this debate while the hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important contribution on the public health approach. Does he agree that that is a very disappointing thing to see?

**Gavin Newlands**: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am not surprised, sadly, that the Home Secretary has left. I was surprised, though, that in his very long speech, much of which we can agree with, he made very little mention of the public health model. It took interventions from Opposition Members to try to draw out his opinion on the public health model, and that was a shame.

**Douglas Ross**: The hon. Gentleman is always very keen on parity, so just for reference and for Hansard, could he confirm where the shadow Home Secretary is?

**Gavin Newlands**: I have no knowledge, for the Hansard record, as to the location of the shadow Home Secretary.

**Douglas Ross**: She is not here.

**Gavin Newlands**: She is not here, but as the SNP spokesperson in this debate, I am not here to answer for the Labour Front Bench, to be perfectly honest. I shall move on from the issue of where Ministers and shadow Ministers are.

As I said, the public health model requires multi-sectoral co-operation. Violence is a complex issue that comes in many forms and encompasses, but is not limited to, verbal, physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Only by tackling the causes of violence, not just the symptoms, can we break the cycle of violence and reduce the impact that it has on individuals, their families, and all our communities.

The Scottish crime and justice survey shows, as of 26 March, a 46% fall between 2008-09 and 2017-18 in violent incidents experienced by adults in Scotland. Violent crime is rare, with just 2.3% of adults experiencing it in the latest year—down from 4.1% in 2008-09. Police-recorded non-sexual violent crime remains at one of its lowest levels since 1974. Emergency admissions to hospital due to assault have more than halved since 2006-07—down by 55%. Emergency admissions due to assault with a sharp object have also fallen substantially in that period, and the number of homicides has more than halved.

Those stats clearly highlight some fantastic progress on this hugely important issue, but it is not enough. Too many people, particularly young people, are still being admitted to hospital and still dying. We must do more; we cannot simply rest on our laurels.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend has made excellent points about the statistics on hospital admissions and hospital visits. Does he agree
that the Navigator part of the violence reduction unit’s programme, whereby interventions are made in hospitals and people are given the option to get out of a life of violence, has contributed to the reductions he mentions.

**Gavin Newlands:** Absolutely—I could not agree more. That speaks to the multi-sectoral approach that I indicated. Although police numbers and so on are important, it is not just about police—it is also about how we tackle this in our schools and our hospitals.

We know that crime is experienced disproportionately across the population, with the poorest and most disadvantaged being far more likely to be on the receiving end. The Scottish violence reduction unit is working with partners to develop innovative approaches to improving outcomes for individuals, families and communities. In the past decade, the Scottish Government have invested over £17 million in violence reduction programmes, including over £3.8 million in the “No Knives Better Lives” campaign. We have invested £12 million since 2008 in the violence reduction unit itself, which includes funding to deliver the mentors in violence prevention programme, which encourages young people not to stand by and allow violence to happen to them and those they know.

The Scottish Government’s implementation, with cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament, of an ambitious twin-track approach of pioneering violence prevention programmes, coupled with enhanced penalties and tough enforcement, has helped to deliver huge falls in violent crime over the last decade. Penalties for possession of a knife are higher in Scotland than in England and Wales, with a five-year maximum term, versus four years in England and Wales. The average length of custodial sentences for knife possession has increased by 85% since 2007-08, with the average sentence now being 421 days, up from 228 days in 2007-08.

As I said, a large part of our success in Scotland has been down to the violence reduction unit, which aims to deliver that reduction by working with partner agencies. Its motto, “Violence is preventable, not inevitable”, is simple but thus far has proved accurate. Influenced by the World Health Organisation’s 2002 report on violence and health, the VRU became the only police force in the world to adopt a public health approach to preventing violence. That includes prevention activity such as education and early intervention, coupled with appropriate law enforcement as necessary. In treating violence as essentially a disease, the VRU sought to diagnose the problem, analyse the causes, examine what works and for whom and develop specific and bespoke solutions that, once evaluated, could be scaled up to help others. That approach has undoubtedly helped and been admired elsewhere.

**Stephen Doughty:** I wholeheartedly agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the public health approach. Does he agree that there is a lot to be learned from the devolved Administrations? In Wales, there is excellent partnership working between South Wales police and our local health boards on a series of issues relating to violence—not only violence in our cities at night but domestic violence, with thousands of women now being protected as a result of partnership working between the health boards and policing.

**Gavin Newlands:** I could not agree more. As I will come on to say, the Scottish Government and Scottish politicians are always looking elsewhere for better ideas and fresh thinking. In recent times, the UK Government have started to open their eyes and mind a lot more to policies of other Governments, including potentially looking at a presumption against short sentences. It is a shame that the Secretary of State has moved on from the Chamber, so we will have to see whether that progresses, but the Government are to be commended for moving on from their closed approach.

The public health model and the violence reduction unit have worked so well that they are now being tried and tested elsewhere. Most notably, Sadiq Khan has taken forward a VRU here in London, which we very much welcome. I hope it is allowed to be effective and is resourced appropriately, as far too many young people are losing their lives on the streets of London.

Any legitimate and full discussion of serious violence must recognise the scale of gender-based violence. Scotland is not exceptional in the sheer scale of this disease, but the Scottish Government are committed to tackling it root and branch. Conviction rates in this area sit at their highest ever levels. Clearly there is still work to do, but victims are now more likely to come forward and report abuse and violence.

The 2017-18 recorded crime statistics included 421 new crimes of disclosing or threatening to disclose an intimate image. The recording of those new crimes is due to the enactment of the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. About 25% of the increase in sexual crime in 2017-18 can be directly attributed to the new intimate images offence. The Scottish Government set up an expert group last year to identify fresh actions to prevent sexual offending involving children and young people, after commissioned research found an increase in cyber-enabled sexual crime between 2013-14 and 2016-17. Those crimes, such as communicating indecently or causing others to view sexual images, typically have younger victims and offenders when committed online.

Police Scotland has a national rape taskforce and rape investigation units within every division, dedicated to investigating rape and serious sexual crime. The Scottish Government are investing an additional £1.1 million to improve how sexual offences cases are handled and improve communication with victims, and a further £2 million to speed up access to support for those affected by rape or sexual assault. That will bring total investment in Scotland in tackling all violence against women and girls to at least £25 million over the next three years.

Sexual crime is a crime of the utmost seriousness, and a type of crime that disproportionately, perhaps overwhelmingly, affects women and girls. Often sexual crime and gender-based violence stem from ignorance, because of a lifetime of unchallenged views and attitudes among men—attitudes that are often exacerbated by peer groups. We need to challenge the sexist attitudes that support this most heinous behaviour.

I am proud to chair the all-party group on the white ribbon campaign and to be an ambassador for White Ribbon UK and White Ribbon Scotland, which is to be commended for its recent work with bookmakers across Scotland in educating customers and getting them to sign the white ribbon pledge. I urge everybody, particularly
all the men present, to make sure they sign the white ribbon pledge never to commit, condone or excuse gender-based violence.

The SNP Scottish Government are leading the way on evidence-based, progressive policy in tackling serious violence. The scale of Scotland’s success is in many ways astonishing. Much of the credit goes to the violence reduction unit—including its co-founders, Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan—and of course to Police Scotland. However, this success itself comes with a recognition that we must keep trying harder.

Indeed, John Carnochan has himself said recently:

“There is a danger people think Scotland is fixed—it is far from being fixed”.

He is right. As I said earlier, too many young people are still being hospitalised and too many young people—too many people—are still being killed. We have made fantastic progress, but there is still a lot more to do. The public health model, when implemented and resourced properly, is effective. I am confident that it will continue to grow and develop in Scotland, but we are always looking elsewhere for fresh thinking about and approaches to many of the challenges we have heard about and undoubtedly will hear more about as the debate develops.

In that spirit, I hope that Members and Ministers from elsewhere will continue to look to Scotland and learn from our experience.

4.16 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). It is important that he highlights the success, as others have, of the violence reduction unit in Scotland. As he says, it is a model that has been praised across the country and across the world.

Importantly, we must recognise that it is not the answer to all our problems. I do not think that that is what he was suggesting. When I questioned witnesses at the Home Affairs Committee, it was clear that we can learn from it—there is no doubt about it—but to say that it is the answer to all our problems would be gravely wrong. We look at good practice across the country and across the world, which is important, but we should not just say, “Well, if it works in Glasgow, it can be moved down to London”; because, for example, things that Police Scotland does in Glasgow do not have the same positive impact in my constituency of Moray. We have to remember that there are different solutions for different problems across the country.

It might seem strange for a Scottish Member to be speaking on an issue that is largely devolved, but I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee, and this is an issue that the entire Committee takes very seriously. I look forward to listening to the Chair, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and other members later.

I did think that it was important to contribute to a debate on this subject. It is important that this debate is being held on the Floor of the House of Commons. I agree with the shadow Home Secretary that it is welcome that the Home Secretary led this debate for the Government, and the shadow Home Secretary led for the Opposition. Only when we get the top players in this entire Parliament discussing this issue of grave importance will we give it

the respect it is due. The fact is that we have dedicated so much time to it on the Floor of the House of Commons, and there is clearly interest across Parliament and from various different MPs across the country.

We listened to the Home Secretary, and in multiple interventions he was challenged on what the Government are doing. We also listened to what the Opposition are doing. This is a serious issue—it is a matter of importance for the entire country—but I will be honest: I have been disappointed by the contributions so far from those on the Opposition Benches. [Interruption.] I am sorry if that disappoints the shadow Home Secretary and if my disappointment in her is disappointing, but I have to say that all we have heard today is problems, not solutions.

She says there is not enough funding for x, y or z—I intervened on the shadow Home Secretary when she was saying we need more police officers and more funding for the police—yet the Opposition vote against such funding because it is not enough. It might not be enough in the eyes of the Opposition, but surely it is better than what they are currently saying is not enough. Any increase should be supported across Parliament. It seems very hollow outside Parliament for them to try to explain that they believe there should be more funding for the police—more resources going into the police, more officers employed, more youth workers, more x, y and z—yet when there are opportunities to support the Government on a cross-party basis with increased funding for these vital resources, Opposition Members vote against that.

I shall speak briefly about the public health approach and the joined-up approach. When, last week, the Minister appeared before the Committee, I put it to her that it is positive that we can get Departments working together on such a crucial issue, but that there is a risk that when a cross-Government approach is adopted there are too many people in charge and no one takes overall responsibility. Is violent crime the most important issue for the Education Department or the Health Department or the Home Office? At times there is a need for leadership, and I worry that by taking too much of a public health approach—by combining all the Departments to say “this is a priority”—we could lose some emphasis and some leadership.

I nevertheless support the Government’s approach. We have joined-up working so we can also have joined-up understanding and joined-up solutions. On balance I think it is the right way to go, but we must always remember the potential pitfalls. I worry that if an issue becomes a priority for all areas, it can become a priority for none.

The Home Secretary and others mentioned drugs. In some parts of the country there has been significant success in tackling drugs. However, as a constituent mentioned to me recently, when there is a big drugs bust and drug dealers are brought to task by the police, sentenced and removed from the community, we should not suppose that demand for drugs has reduced, because it has not—it is simply that the supply of drugs at that point has reduced. Our local papers, certainly in Moray, understandably write very positively about big drugs busts that succeed in getting drug dealers. Such busts are very rare in Moray—we live in a very safe part of the country—but when they occur the local papers praise the police for how much they have done to remove those people from our streets. However, we have
not removed the problem. More must be done to enable us to understand the underlying reasons people use drugs and why there is a need to tackle those drug dealers. As I say, a drugs bust does not get rid of the demand; it only reduces supply at that point in time.

County lines took up a large part of the speeches by the Home Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary and others. The problem seems to have increased unbelievably over the past few years. As the Home Secretary mentioned, the current estimate is that in 2019 there are 2,000 county lines in operation across the country. Just four years ago, in 2015, the National Crime Agency was saying that only seven police forces were affected by county lines. By 2017, that had increased to every police force in the country, and it is incredible that there has been such a large increase in county lines in such a short time.

I welcome the approach the Government have taken to tackle that issue, because it affects every single constituency. A crime that begins in London can rapidly end up in Aberdeen, and if it is in Aberdeen it can quickly spread to Moray and other parts of the country. Something that we believe is a crime problem in the south of England can, because of county lines, quickly become a crime problem across the country.

Young people are intrinsically involved in the problems we are experiencing with serious violence and, I believe, in the solutions to serious violence. At the Home Affairs Committee about three or four weeks ago, one of our fellow MPs was appearing before us as a member of the panel of witnesses, and she made it very clear that Members of the Youth Parliament had voted knife crime their top campaign issue. Despite that, we heard from the Home Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary and others—but we do not hear directly from young people.

Yes, it is important that we, as Members, can stand up in Parliament and express young people’s thoughts, and pass on what they have said in the Youth Parliament, and the fact that they have made knife crime their top priority, but surely we should also be listening to them directly—listening to their concerns, listening to what they have to say, and listening to their solutions. It would be very useful to hear from the Youth Parliament in this inquiry and in other inquiries going forward. When some young people gave us a confidential briefing, that was perhaps one of the most enlightening aspects of our evidence session on serious and violent crime.

That brings me to my final point. I often refer to my interest outside Parliament in sport. The young people we heard from, who were involved in the programme and wanted to speak to the Committee anonymously, felt that sport could have done so much to take them away from a life of crime. When they got into a life of crime and serious violence, it was sport that they were able to focus on to ensure they got out of that habit.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend may have caught the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report on the social impact of sport. It can help young people and it can help reduce reoffending. One issue I have is that there is not enough joined-up thinking in the criminal justice system in relation to participation in sport and its help in reducing reoffending.

Douglas Ross: I welcome my hon. Friend’s point. The focus on reoffending is most important. When the Minister gave evidence last week, I think she had recently been speaking to the Premier League about how we use sport as a tool to work with young people. So much sport goes on every day of the week all across the country. There is untapped potential to use sport as a key to improve our relationship with young people.

Rushanara Ali: I know the hon. Gentleman is a recent addition to the House of Commons, but in the 2010 Parliament the Government cut school sports funding, a provision that benefited all children up and down the country. It feels like we are back to square one. Conservative Members talk about the merits of school sport and sport generally, but we have actually gone backwards because of those cuts.

Douglas Ross: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but we have to be very careful that we do not just rely on the Government to pay for everything. For example, we have extremely rich football clubs in this country. Surely they can put their resources, which they gain from fans week in, week out, back into the communities they serve.

I know that many Members wish to speak in the debate, so I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. I agree with the Home Secretary that this is a national emergency. It is right that the Government have highlighted it as such and are working across Departments to deal with it. It is right that we are debating it on the Floor of the House of Commons today. I hope that communities affected by serious violence—individually, families or communities at large—take some comfort from the fact that this issue is being debated in the House of Commons and is of such serious importance for Members on both sides of the House that something is being done. Unless we work on this issue within Government, across Government and across Parliament, we will not make an impact.

We have seen that just one life lost is one too many. We are seeing too many lives lost as a result of serious violence. I believe the Government’s strategy and their emphasis on getting it right will save lives in the future. That is surely to be welcomed.

4.28 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee. I apologise to the House that he and I will probably have to leave shortly, as we have an evidence session with young people this afternoon. He rightly says that we should do more to make sure young
people's voices are heard, not just in our Committee but in all Committee inquiries and in all the work we do across the House.

This is a deeply serious issue. Lives are being lost and families devastated. Too often, parents end up fearful and children at risk. In West Yorkshire, knife crime has doubled since 2010. It has gone up by 20% in the past year alone. Across the country, we see a similar picture. It is not just in our biggest cities but in our towns, often spread by county lines. The most disturbing figures are those showing that since 2012 the number of children and young people under 16 admitted to hospital for knife wounds has doubled. One of the NHS consultants we heard from said that the peak time was between 4 and 6 in the afternoon—after school, when children have just finished a French, history or maths lesson and should just be going home, but find themselves caught up in violence instead, and do not make it home.

The Home Affairs Committee launched its inquiry into serious violence before Christmas. We will draw our conclusions together shortly. I will not pre-empt the conclusions, but I will reflect on some of the evidence we have heard. I start with evidence from young people and youth workers, who told us how many young people do not feel safe on the streets after school and think the only way to feel safe is to carry a knife. They do not see the police as people they can turn to. They do not have police officers that they know in schools. They do not have outreach workers, youth services or safe spaces to go to. The greater risks are for those young people who have been excluded or who might be vulnerable in different ways; those who get caught up in drug networks, county lines or gangs.

We were struck by the evidence from the police, who evidently are working immensely hard to tackle the problem but are undoubtedly overstretched. They can operate targeted, intelligence-led policing, but they find it much harder to provide and resource the neighbourhood police officers or school-based officers who might help to prevent some of the violence in the first place. Having seen their work over the years, I find it particularly troubling that we have lost so many school-based police officers, because they can often build up trust and relationships, gather intelligence, and simply work on prevention and practical messages for young people about how they can stay safe and build their confidence in their lives and not fall into patterns of violence or become vulnerable. I was struck, too, that although the Met has had big reductions in its number of school-based officers, it is now trying to increase the number of officers based in schools because it sees their value. In the west midlands, they told us that they did not have any police officers based in schools and had no prospect of being able to provide them.

There is undoubtedly an issue about whether the resources going into tackling serious violence match the scale and urgency of the problem, and whether the scale and pace of the early interventions the Government have talked about match in any way the scale of the violence and the number of lives being lost. We have seen many worthwhile targeted projects, but they have simply too narrow a reach; they do not reach enough young people or communities, so they cannot tackle enough of the problem. Equally, although the police do some excellent work in tackling some county lines networks and drug networks, that is not able to match the scale of the problem.

I want to talk in particular about co-ordination and leadership concerns. Whatever the level of resources, there are key challenges around co-ordination, drive, urgency and leadership. We heard considerable evidence from a range of witnesses who believed that the Home Office should do more. When the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for South and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), gave evidence, I asked questions about how many young people the Government were trying to reach. The Government have rightly talked about a public health strategy, and the definition of such a strategy is that there is a defined population and an intelligence and data-based approach. I therefore welcome the points the Home Secretary made about increasing the level of evidence and data we have, but I was concerned that, in that evidence session, neither the Minister nor the officials gave us a clear sense of how many young people the Home Office is trying to reach with its strategy and what scale of intervention we should expect to see over the next three months, the next six months and the next 12 months. This problem is acute—lives are at risk—so we need clear objectives, a clear sense of progress, a clear sense of direction, and action to make sure things are happening and being delivered.

We were concerned to discover that there was no clear sense of who would be responsible in each area. Who in the west midlands, in West Yorkshire, in Bedfordshire will be driving the action to tackle serious and violent crime in their area? Will it be the police and crime commissioner? The chief constable? The Mayor? The leader of the local council? The chair of the safeguarding board? There is a clear need for co-ordination in every area if we are to bring all these different organisations together.

I welcome the Government’s talk about a duty on public sector institutions to have regard to the risk of serious violence and the impact of knife crime, but simply having a duty when there is no framework to co-operate and co-ordinate is not enough. There must be practical mechanisms to make sure things change. There has to be someone the Minister can ring up to say, “We’ve seen your figures are going in the wrong direction. There is a growing problem in your part of the country. What are you doing to sort it out?” The Minister needs to be able to ring someone up, ask what is happening, get the feedback and make sure action is being taken to protect young people.

I know the Minister was going to a meeting after the evidence session, so she may well have made further progress. I hope so. If the violence reduction units—in those areas where they are to be introduced—are not to be in place for another six months, I would like to know who will be leading the work in the next six months to make sure young people are protected and that action is being taken in a co-ordinated way between the police and other organisations to tackle some of these awful crimes?

Let me quote some of the witness evidence to the inquiry. Sara Thornton said:

“I think that where we have so many young people dying in our streets, we need a much more concerted response from Government.”
Sir Denis O’Connor, who is a former chief inspector of constabulary and was involved in previous programmes to tackle knife crime and street crime, thought that the strategy was “much more concerned with its narrative and less with action”. The Met Commissioner told us that “we are not yet seeing real cross-Government action being delivered in a meaningful way on the ground and in our communities.” Dame Louise Casey, who was also involved in previous Government programmes, described the Government’s strategy as “woefully inadequate”.

The Government have some very good intentions on this—they have set out a strong sense of concern and commitment to tackling knife crime—but the challenge for the Home Office is to make sure it has enough urgency, that its sense of determination matches the scale of the problem and that the partnership between all Departments is tight enough and strong enough and has enough follow-up to deliver action on, for example, the number of young people being excluded from school—some of whom are very vulnerable—and to take action in hospitals. The Redthread programme is extremely good, but are enough hospitals involved in such early intervention programmes? We need partnership working in communities and investment in wider universal youth services, as well as some of the targeted work.

In the end, we will save lives only if organisations work together, but for them, working together, to have an impact there also needs to be strong leadership from the Government and the Home Office. I hope we will see that leadership over the next few months. The Select Committee looks forward to scrutinising this work further as part of its work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest that if every Member takes about 10 minutes, everyone will get in.

4.39 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee. I welcome this debate, which is timely—in fact, it is overdue. We need to debate this subject regularly because it is something that our constituents around the country are focused on. They see people in their communities, particularly young people, being badly hurt and losing their lives because of this terrible epidemic of serious violence. That is not to say that such things have not happened before, or that serious violence is something new; of course it is not, but it is right there now, and it is affecting our constituents throughout the country. It can be seen in the broader context of serious crime, and I hope we will have a full-on debate on that. Although that often results ultimately in serious violence, it does not always do so, but it affects our constituents nevertheless.

In Staffordshire, we have seen an increase in knife crime over the past few years. In 2017-18 there were 1,175 knife crimes, an increase of 22% on the previous year. Staffordshire police, whose area also covers the Stoke-on-Trent city authority area, have done a great deal to tackle the problem, and I congratulate them on that, but there is a huge amount more to do. In March this year, in Operation Sceptre, the police concentrated on both enforcement and education, and in my speech I want to focus on education and prevention.

Staffordshire has the same problems with county lines that are being experienced in other areas up and down the country. I do not pretend to have great knowledge about the whole issue of drugs. I believe that there are many views on what is best, and I am willing to listen to the evidence, but we need to debate that issue more in this place. The criminality surrounding drugs is a huge problem for the country, and it needs to be discussed. We need to see resolute action and a policy that is stuck to over the years, so that the scourge of illegal drugs, involving both the users and those involved in the trafficking, are eliminated or at least minimised.

If we look across the Atlantic to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, we see that they have a number of helpful proposals for prevention. I shall list them all, because they are brief, and I shall then concentrate on two of them. They are prioritising the family environment, which has been mentioned by several Members; quality early education and early intervention; strengthening young people’s skills; connecting young people to caring adults and activities; protective community environments—the physical environment as well as the more general community environment—and intervention to lessen harm and prevent future risk.

Let me start with strengthening young people’s skills and connecting young people to caring adults and activities. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned the importance of a holistic approach to the provision of young people’s activities, and I agree. When I was a little younger than I am now, I worked in and supported two youth clubs in Hackney. One was a statutory, open youth club in Homerton, which provided a very good, if sometimes difficult, environment. The other, a voluntary youth club in a church in Clapton Park, was open to many young people experiencing severe challenges. Both those clubs—difficult types of club—really helped. They were not run on a nine-to-five basis; the youth workers were there for the young people at all hours of the day or night, and that is absolutely vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) mentioned football clubs. With colleagues, I helped to run a Duke of Edinburgh’s Award youth programme at Arsenal football club for a number of years, and that was very good. Other football clubs around the country commit great resources to such programmes. However, this is not just about providing a good environment, although that is very important; it is also about strengthening young people’s skills. That can, of course, be done in schools, and I am passionately committed to seeing life skills taught much more in our schools, but it can be done in youth centres and youth clubs as well. As the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said, youth clubs also connect young people to caring adults, and to the role models, some of them male, that young people so desperately need. In that regard, they play an extremely important role.

The second area is prioritising the family environment. I welcome the work that Sure Start centres have done over the years, which is being progressed in family hubs. Those family hubs will be important. The work that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has done alongside Lord Farmer, David Burrowes and others is vital.

I urge that all of us, across the House, see family hubs as incredibly important parts of our local communities, where not just children from zero to five but young
people all the way up to 19 are given the opportunity to come together with their families, and perhaps mentors, to discuss the problems in the families and to see the opportunities that are available to them in a positive and affirming environment. So often, young people are given a negative approach. Most—I am sure all—hon.

Members present feel a real sense of hope about the future of our country when they see the qualities of the young people they come across on a day-to-day basis. They must be affirmed, however, and family hubs are a place to do that.

As I have said, we need to debate serious crime and serious violence more often. If we do not, we are failing our constituents and particularly our young people, on a matter that causes heartache and heartfelt every day, week and month in communities across the country.

4.46 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Through my work with the Youth Violence Commission, I have spoken with many young people whose friends have been stabbed; with the grieving families of victims; and with the traumatised friends of perpetrators. If we trace the lives lost to violence, or to long prison sentences, back to childhood, we hear familiar stories of domestic abuse, neglect, childhood trauma and school exclusions.

Let us take one child, who I will call Jack. Jack’s father is unpredictable and often violent. His mother self-medicates to cope. She has few friends in the area where they live. She does not know her neighbours and she is financially dependent on Jack’s father. From an early age, Jack witnesses his mother being beaten and abused by his father. As a small child, he is withdrawn, anxious and has trouble sleeping.

When Jack starts primary school, his teacher notices that he struggles to concentrate most days. Sometimes he seems utterly sleep deprived. He is often late in the morning and falls behind with his school work. Jack struggles to keep up with his classmates, and feeling anxious about that, he starts to become more disruptive.

By the time Jack starts secondary school, things have become worse. The police have been called to the house on several occasions, and Jack has been referred to social services. At 13 years old, things have become so bad at home that the courts grant a court order and Jack is taken into care. He is placed with a foster family, which costs the council approximately £27,000 a year.

Jack struggles at school. He finds it hard to concentrate and he is behind his classmates, so he increasingly skips school. When he is there, he has a reputation for being disruptive and aggressive. That behaviour leads him to be suspended on numerous occasions until, at the age of 14, he is permanently excluded from school and sent to a pupil referral unit, which costs an average of £17,000 per pupil per year.

Shortly afterwards, Jack assaults a boy who ends up in hospital with various injuries. He is now known to the police and receives a warning. The cost to the police and the criminal justice system of responding to a single such crime is approximately £2,500. The immediate cost of health services for the victim is nearly £900. Jack is then referred to a youth offending team, which costs about £1,500. For a while, things get better. After moving placements several times, he settles with a foster family and he does not reoffend for a year.

Shortly after turning 16, however, he goes to a party and a heated argument quickly descends into a fight. Jack struggles with how to handle his emotions, and he stabs another boy. He did not expect this to be fatal, but two days later the victim dies in hospital from his injuries. Right now, at this point, we have lost two young lives. The devastating loss of these two lives is felt not just by the families but by the whole community and across society as well.

The overall cost to the hospital is more than £2,000. The cost of services to the victim’s family is about £6,000. After a trial by jury, which costs upwards of £150,000, Jack is sentenced to 15 years in prison. The average cost per place per year in a young offenders institution is £76,000. The average cost of a single homicide to the police is more than £11,000, and to the criminal justice system it is more than £800,000. Then there are the further hidden costs of a homicide. They include the lost earnings of the victim and the perpetrator and of their families, as well as the cost of the impact on the victim’s family and friends’ mental health, and the cost of the fear of violence and the trauma of the wider community. In total, the Home Office estimates that one homicide costs society more than £3 million. We have one boy dead and another boy in prison. By the time he is 18, Jack has cost the state nearly £4 million in interventions from the police, social services and youth offending teams, and in costs to the NHS, the local council and the criminal justice system.

Now, let us start the story differently. Let us add in some true early interventions. Imagine that we have another child in similar circumstances: let us call him John. When John’s mother is pregnant with him, she attends a Sure Start centre in her local area. The family centre gives her advice on family health, parenting, employment and training, and it is a good place for her to meet other expectant mothers. When John is born, she continues to attend the centre regularly, to see her friends and to get advice on parenting and child health. On average, the programmes cost around £1,000 per year per child.

Things at home are not easy. John regularly witnesses his father being physically abusive to his mother, and he is an anxious toddler as a result. At the children’s centre, one of the health visitors notices that John’s mother has signs of physical abuse and reports this to social services. The centre is aware of this and keeps an eye on her, and the group of friends that John’s mother has made at the centre are supportive. Unfortunately, she ends up in hospital, but the centre still supports her in leaving her partner. It refers her to a refuge, and the training on offer at the centre helps her to find a part-time job. The place in the refuge costs £52 a day, and the training costs £1,000.

The children’s centre is connected to a maintained nursery school, which John attends when he is old enough. At nursery he develops his communication skills, and by the time is four he is seen as school-ready. He is more independent, and has strong social skills for his age. As a result, he settles in quickly and makes friends, and he can keep up with his peers throughout primary school. Generally, things with John and his mother are much more settled by the time he starts...
secondary school. His mother is working full time, and after having had to move several times between friends and temporary accommodation, they have now been living in the same place for a year. The secondary school that John attends has a school nurse and strong mental health support, meaning that the teachers have time to work with and support all the children. The school has a zero exclusions policy as a result. The school nurse costs the school around £40,000 a year.

John’s mother works late, so after school he attends the youth centre down the road with his friends. As he gets older, the youth centre is also able to provide him with skills training and advice on work experience. The school has a dedicated police officer attached to it, who John and his friends occasionally play football with at lunch and confide in if they are concerned about something. The partnership between the local police force and John’s school has also been beneficial for the police. In building up trust with the pupils and their parents, they are able to obtain information about vulnerable children who are at risk of being groomed by gangs. This partnership usually costs about £50,000 a year.

John still suffers with anxiety and occasionally has problems controlling his temper, but the school has the internal resources to support him and he receives mental health support for managing his temper.

When he reaches the end of year 11, John leaves school with five good GCSEs. He has a part-time job and has got into a local college to do business studies. He has also become a peer mentor in his youth centre and supports other young people. Based on the crude estimates I have outlined in this story, the cost of that early intervention is about £170,000. The cost of failure for Jack is more than 20 times that amount.

An early intervention approach will not only save money; it also has the potential to save many lives. We know that early intervention is key. A strategy based on very early intervention and wraparound support would not only reduce violence but have wider benefits for society and the economy.

Research shows that adverse childhood experiences or traumatic incidents in childhood can have a lasting impact in adulthood. Compared with people who have no ACEs, those who have four or more are seven times more likely to be involved in violence, four times more likely to have a low level of mental wellbeing and 11 times more likely to be incarcerated. As MPs, we need to be far more aware of this. In an attempt to raise the profile of that, I am writing to all MPs to ask them to complete a short online survey on how many ACEs the profile of that, I am writing to all MPs to ask them to complete a short online survey on how many ACEs they have. I hope that that will focus some minds.

We have to stop just talking about early intervention and start genuinely resourcing and delivering it. A true public health approach should focus on that, because every life is precious and our young people deserve the best start in life.

4.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I was going to name-check her at the start of my speech, but as she has now spoken, I can express my thanks not just for the way she tirelessly campaigns and demands that we debate the matter in Parliament, as we are doing today, but for her speech. She brings so much substance and experience and so many ideas to the debate and I am very grateful to her. In that spirit, I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), who is not here today. She chairs the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and has brought so many people into Parliament for us as MPs to listen to. She deserves tremendous credit.

If I may spread my love to the Scottish National party Benches, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), whom I was able to introduce to my constituents when she gave her views to them on the public health approach in Glasgow. I also thank Government Front Benchers. The Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, who is now on her own on the Front Bench, has given me a lot of time and shown a lot of patience, it is fair to say, with some of my ideas, and I am grateful to her. Her shadow, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) also brings much passion, compassion and intellect to this arena. I therefore believe that, cross-party, there is an opportunity for us to try to drive for more.

My reasons for speaking on the matter are my huge concern about where we are and my desire that we do more. I spent five years working in Brixton and Camberwell Green for a youth centre where I was a manager and a trustee. We were able to make strides in interventions for young people who were either going off the rails or were likely to do that due to their family backgrounds. We were able to intervene and provide them with a safe space and activities such as sport, art, environmental activities and horse riding. We had some great successful groups.

The youth centre was interesting because it had no Government or local authority funding. We fundraised. I spent all my time, in the days before the internet, going through the books, seeing whether I could get money from, for example, the Guinness Trust, Peabody and other groups that would fund us. We were successful in getting the funding. We did not want to be funded by local authorities. Lambeth offered us a small amount of money but we realised that all the entrepreneurship and the way in which we wanted almost to be run by our young people would be sucked out if we had to tick all the local government boxes.

I am therefore genuinely reflecting on the fact that youth centres and the current model are perhaps not the best model. The Home Secretary mentioned the 100 new OnSide youth opportunities. That gives us a chance to set up youth organisations that young people really want rather than what they are told can be provided.

I am also mindful that we have talked about cuts and austerity. Of course I recognise that there is an implication if the funds are not there, but I have cause to reflect on the situation in 2008 when the then Mayor, Ken Livingstone, lost his position very much as a result of the anger that knife crime had got out of control. A new approach was brought in, and I was chatting earlier with the Minister for Housing, whose role it was under that Administration to drive the Met police to do more. He had great success in helping the police to set up Operation Trident, and he made sure that the police’s feet were kept close to the floor. He had photos in his office of all the young people whose lives had been tragically lost, so that when the police came to meet him, they were reminded of exactly what their duty should be, which is of course to protect the public.
As well as talking about resources, we should talk about how current resources are used and whether we are getting everything out of all the responsible organisations. Of course, in addition to resources, it is a question of powers, and I welcome the fact that the Offensive Weapons Bill is about to become law. I am particularly interested in the knife crime prevention orders, which are undoubtedly a roll of the dice. They are unproven, but the key thing is that the Met police and the Mayor of London have asked for them. There is a feeling that if we do not make an early intervention to stop people being in certain spaces where we have evidence they should not be, or to stop people organising themselves on social media, where we see huge issues of people being inflamed and provoked, we will lead ourselves into endemic knife crime. I am very supportive of these initiatives and, in her summing up, I am keen for the Minister to tell us when we will start to see those orders being used.

I am also a firm advocate of the use of section 60 stop and search powers. We had 1.5 million stop and searches in 2008, which is arguably too many. They have now been targeted but, at 300,000, there is an argument that there are now not enough. We know that 17% of stop and searches lead to an arrest, so they do have some impact.

I will give some time back to the House, because the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford, quite rightly having been such an earnest campaigner, took a little more. I am grateful to the Government for taking the steps they have taken, and I want to see us continue with the public health approach. It is exciting to follow what has been done in Glasgow and, looking back 20 years, in Chicago, where the public health approach was first pioneered. There are some great steps.

We need to make sure that we work with all the providers and establishments, particularly the public sector key workers who will be so critical to whether this is a success, in order to join up the schools, the health service and social services. That will take a lot of time and we need to take them with us, particularly when it comes to their new duty to inform.

I am grateful for the steps that the Government have taken, and I hope we can continue to work on a cross-party basis to make sure that more lives are not blighted. We talk about Brexit far too often in this place, and the Benches are packed when we do. If we look around the Chamber today, we see there is hardly anyone here. These issues cost lives and ruin the lives of families, and the fact that MPs are not taking it seriously enough to be here to speak up for their communities is not a good look for this House.

5.3 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is clear from this debate, and from the experience of our constituents, that the Government are losing the war on violent crime. A generation of young people in urban and rural areas is growing up in fear of violence, in fear of knife crime and gun crime, and in fear of losing their lives on the very streets on which they live.

Knife-related homicide is at its highest level since recording began in 1946. Some 285 people were killed with knives and sharp instruments in 2017-18, and there were 18,000 assaults and 17,000 robberies involving a knife or a sharp object in the year to September 2018, as well as 3,000 threats to kill. It is not just knives, but guns too. Last year, gun crime increased by 11%, to 6,604 recorded offences, compared with 2016. It has not always been like this. In the past eight years, knife crime in Tower Hamlets has increased by 34%, from 794 offences in 2010-11 to 1,065 offences in 2017-18.

Each and every incident is horrific, as has been highlighted by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. Each murder creates a shattering lifetime of grief for the friends and family of the victim. Each wounding can change lives forever, causing physical disability and mental trauma and reducing life expectancy. However, these incidents also have a deeper impact on our society, as others have mentioned. The increase in violent crime creates a climate of fear and suspicion. It adds to anxiety and has an impact on mental health. It creates a divide between the generations and between communities. It drives a wedge into our society, and makes us distrustful of our fellow citizens and apprehensive about entering public spaces.

Why is this happening? There are those who claim that it is all down to an increase in reporting, as the shadow Home Secretary pointed out. Of course, that would be entirely welcome, but it does not explain the spike in numbers. A number of my hon. Friends have pointed out some of the underlying causes, and we do not need a degree in criminology to understand what is going on here. In particular, there are major factors in play that, whether the Government recognise it or not, relate in part to the erosion of the resources and support available for young people, which can be seen from Sure Start to youth services, school sports, education, further education, those with special needs, children in care, and children at risk of being excluded from school. In those and a number of other areas, young people’s support networks and the resources available to back them up, help them achieve and help them realise their potential have been shattered. Instead, young people are victims of crime and, at worst, face death as a consequence of knife crime and other violent crime. That is a waste of talent and potential in our society, and it creates fear and has an impact in the wider community as well.

Funding for local authority children’s services has fallen by £3 billion since 2010. Since 2010, hundreds of millions of pounds have also been axed from youth services; as has been mentioned, there has been a reduction of 138,000 in the number of youth service places and an overall cut of £760 million. Some 3,600 youth workers have been lost from our communities; those people help to support our young people, but they are no longer in those roles. Central Government funding for youth offending schemes has also halved, from £145 million in 2010 to £72 million in 2017-18. So it is not by accident that we have ended up here. These catastrophic cuts have contributed to undermining support, and they are underlying factors in what has happened and in the rise in violent crime.

That is not to mention the significant cuts in policing. In London, numbers have fallen below 30,000 officers. There has also been a cut of 6,800 in police community support officers, who have been the backbone of community
policing. They spot problems early and work with young people and other services in a multi-agency approach to support young people before they get into further trouble and face the threat of violence, or end up being groomed by organised criminal gangs and drugs gangs and facing the same plight as so many young people who have lost their lives. In London, we have lost a third of police staff posts as well.

In my constituency and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, we had 125 police community support officers in 2010, and the number went down drastically to just 27 in 2017. That is a 78% cut, and such cuts have consequences. Combined, the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney—they have had to merge into a borough command unit, partly because of the cuts—have lost 500 officers in the past nine years. That has a consequence. The idea is that by adding a plaster to the wound with some additional funding here and there the Government can reverse the damage that those massive cuts have had over the past few years, but frankly that is tinkering around the edges. It is just not going to address the major problem of violent crime that we face in our society.

We need to look into where legal changes might be necessary, but it is really important that the Government do not respond in a kneejerk way and return to disproportionate stop-and-search policies that end up turning communities, particularly the black and minority community, against the police. The use of stop-and-search must remain proportionate and safe, people must be protected, and innocent people must not be caught up in it. We have to make sure that we invest in police services, and in our young people through youth services, Sure Start centres, children’s centres, holiday projects, boxing clubs and other sports facilities, on the scale that is required. We need to invest in drugs action teams, which have lost funding. In constituencies such as mine, they have been doing incredible work to prevent young people from returning to gangs. We also need to deal with addiction issues and mental health projects, because funding for child mental health programmes has been cut. All these are interconnected issues. The joint approach—the public health model—is important, but it has to mean something. Just calling it the public health approach without backing it with resources is not going to work.

There is rightly general consensus that we absolutely have to deal with the terrible issue of serious violence, which is affecting our constituents and the whole of society. I am sure we all now have a greater fear of violent crime than we ever did, because this is happening in our communities. It is happening to people we know, their family members or their relatives. I know that through my work in my constituency: murders have taken place in our borough and there are reports of knife crime almost on a weekly basis. We need the Government to put in the investment and act, and we need to ensure that we do everything possible to prevent further deaths.

5.12 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this debate. There have been excellent speeches from many Members, but I wish to pay a particular special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for her moving and thought-provoking speech, for her work in speaking out about the rise in knife crime, and for subsequently establishing and chairing the Youth Violence Commission which has been crucial in looking into ways in which not only the Government but all areas of society can help to tackle knife crime and youth violence.

I appreciate that the focus today may be on serious violence in the major cities, but I wish to put on record what is happening in Gwent, and particularly in Newport, as sadly none of our communities is immune from serious violence. It affects us all. We are also seeing the emergence of county lines as a serious threat, and an increase in the level of serious violence that comes with that. Drug markets generate violence and a crime hierarchy, with our most vulnerable young people groomed to enter the lower levels of drug distribution.

I am grateful to be able to say that in my constituency knife crime may not be as big an issue as it is elsewhere, but serious and organised crime, and its association with violence, has to be approached as a priority. The Minister for Security and Economic Crime will be aware of some of the fantastic prevention and response work that is happening in Gwent, as he spoke at the launch of the serious and organised crime strategy at the Celtic Manor in Newport last week. I praise Gwent police and Chief Constable Julian Williams for their successes in bringing criminals to justice and taking drugs off our streets. They have dismantled a number of organised crime groups in the past six months and made 163 serious organised crime arrests, and they have seized about £600,000, 50 high-value vehicles and hundreds of kilos of class A and B drugs.

As we all know, we need to keep on our guard and invest in our young people. As our police and crime commissioner, Jeff Cuthbert, said last week, serious and organised crime affects all communities across Wales and no single agency can resolve the problem alone, as we have talked much about today. That is why, in Gwent, partnership work has been so important. Dismantling crime groups has been backed up by a multi-agency approach to identify and work with vulnerable individuals at risk of criminality and violence, which is a need that the Youth Violence Commission and yesterday’s Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report have identified. The Home Office has funded the post of serious and organised crime co-ordinator—one of only five in the country—which will have an impact on the tackling of serious violence as well as organised crime.

Gwent police is currently working in partnership with Newport Council, Barnado’s, Newport Live, St Giles, Crimestoppers, MutualGain and the Welsh Government on prevention, intervention and community resilience. What does that mean in practice? It means that sessions have been delivered to more than 5,400 pupils in all of our Newport schools on county lines, gangs and violence, with follow-up advice encouraging people to report their concerns. There has been intensive training for youth workers, social workers, teachers, housing officers and many more. Police and local authorities are working closely together to identify those children most at risk, with early intervention work by Barnado’s, Families First and St Giles.

A large range of diversionary activities are going on through the Newport Live Positive Futures programme. Its evening sport sessions—we talked a lot about sport
today—are in the right place and at the right time of the evening. They are hugely successful, with more than 20 sessions running a week in Newport alone. Some attract up to 70 young people in a session. The programme also takes referrals for one-to-one mentoring and personal development, again using sport and physical activity as a hook. They have seen young people, through sport, gain qualifications and go on to further education. The scheme is working to divert young people from a path that could lead to violence and crime.

There is a huge amount going on. I wish to put on record my thanks to all those involved in the work in my community. It is partnership work at its best. This is new work, but we are already beginning to see individuals that it has helped. Lives are changing as young people are being helped to avoid a life of crime.

There is great expectation that this early intervention work will be an investment in young people's futures and in preventing crime and violence. Although I am proud to be able to highlight this work today, there is and in preventing crime and violence. Although I am proud to be able to highlight this work today, there is still the reality that we talked about earlier—that partnership working requires time, staff and resources from each and every agency involved. With these strategies in place, I hope the Government will consider the potential of just what could be achieved if the backdrop to this were not thousands of officers being cut from the police and councils having to lose thousands of staff. The point has been well made today about the lack of youth provision and the fact that crucial statutory and non-statutory services are at breaking point. With significant investment in the police and local authorities, preventative action could be one of the answers to much of the youth crime and violence that we see.

We need the urgency and determination that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about earlier on, and we hope to see more action from the Government.

5.17 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It was good to see the Home Secretary in his place today. I know he is sincere in his attempts to deal with this issue, but, as many of my hon. Friends know, what we are trying to say to the Government and to the Home Secretary, as one of the most senior members of Her Majesty's Government, is that we do not see any urgency. We need the urgency and determination that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about earlier on, and we hope to see more action from the Government.

We face a national emergency; there is no argument about it. Every single person in this country, whether in the police, the criminal justice system, local government or the voluntary or community sector, is seeing the increase in knife crime and the increasing numbers of young people getting involved in criminal activity. They, like the Home Secretary, know that one of the most effective ways of dealing with the problem is by tackling the root causes of crime and violence among young people.

I have done a lot of work with young people on the streets. I have been to estates in London, and in many other parts of the country, where young people are living in fear of the law. They feel that the law is not on their side, that they are being targeted and that they are being the victims of crime even though they are doing nothing wrong. They are being stigmatised by society, and we have a moral duty to protect them and to ensure that they are not thrown to the wolves.

The Home Secretary knows that we need a review or research into the issue; we need police officers. It is a no-brainer. We do not need a report; we need more police officers. It is a no-brainer. We do not need a review or research into the issue; we need police officers on the street.

This is a national emergency. I have said it before and I will say it again: Cobra should be meeting to deal with it. The whole apparatus of the state should be operating to get at people, not at the kids who are just carrying knives. Of course, the kids have to be sorted out and stopped—but where is the effort to bring down the big criminal gangs and the people running these operations?

People in estates are terrified. They are more frightened of the criminal gangs than they are of the police. They are more frightened of getting evidence to get these people prosecuted than they are of the legal apparatus of the state. It cannot go on. No wonder people sometimes turn around, look at me—I do not want to offend what the knife crime summit is. I have read the written statement, but where is the opportunity for Members of this House to ask the Home Secretary time and again what is happening, what is going on, what is working and what is not? That opportunity is not there. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and others have raised this issue time and again. It is not good enough.

Yesterday, the National Crime Agency told the Government that it wants a few million here or a few million there, but that it needs £2.7 billion to tackle the issue. That is not the Labour party or anyone else trying to score party political points; it is the chief executive of the National Crime Agency telling the Government that it needs those additional resources to tackle the serious crime that this country faces. Two thousand county lines now exist, and the number is growing exponentially. This Chamber should be roaring with disgust at the fact that county lines are operating in every single part of our country—not just in London and the big cities, but in coastal towns and rural areas. There are 2,000 county lines, and a senior officer who appeared before the Home Affairs Committee a couple of weeks ago said that an estimated 10,000 children are involved. That is an absolute disgrace. Where has the Home Secretary been? He has just been banging his fist on the Dispatch Box, saying on behalf of the country that he is not going to accept it.

As I said two or three months ago, if there were a terrorist attack, the resources and cameras of the nation would be focused on that. This Chamber would be packed with Ministers—starting with the Prime Minister—queuing up day after day to lay out, quite rightly, how we were going to defend our communities against the terrorist threat. Nobody is saying that that should not happen. Make no mistake, of course that would be the right thing to do. But where is the same passion and urgency from the Government when so many young people and others have been stabbed to death, shot or affected by violent crime? Every single community is affected—10,000 children. Where is the passion and desire to do something about it?

When we start cutting the numbers of police officers, youth workers and so on, it does create a problem. I will just leave that point for the Government to reflect on. Every single constituency in this country is affected, including the Minister’s. She will not go into the next election saying, “We’ve got too many police officers.” Every single person in this country is saying that we need more police officers. It is a no-brainer. We do not need a review or research into the issue; we need police officers on the street.

This is a national emergency. I have said it before and I will say it again: Cobra should be meeting to deal with it. The whole apparatus of the state should be operating to get at people, not at the kids who are just carrying drugs. Of course, the kids have to be sorted out and stopped—but where is the effort to bring down the big criminal gangs and the people running these operations?
anybody, so I will use myself as an example—and say, “Does Vernon Coaker know what he is talking about? Does he know what we are facing in our community? Does he understand what it’s really like on our estate? He says that we should go to the police, but where is he going to be at 9 o’clock, 10 o’clock or 11 o’clock, when people wait outside our house and intimidate us? Is he going to be there protecting us?”

It cannot go on. I do not want to paint a picture of a country completely out of control, but in some parts of our country the situation is simply and utterly unacceptable. The whole apparatus of state should be getting in there and sorting it out. I am not prepared to see 10,000 children—children!—left operating under county lines; and the number will grow unless we get hold of it.

Clearly we need more police on the street, and £2.7 billion, as Lynne Owens has said. Where are the Government in this? The Home Secretary should have been banging the desk and saying, “As a result of this serious violence debate, I am going to go and see the Chancellor.” The whole House will support the Home Secretary if he goes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and says that he needs masses more money to deal with this problem. It is a national emergency and money should not be an object. We would support him—I would support him—in demanding that money for policing. I would also support him in demanding extra money for the youth workers and the community workers—for opening the youth centres and helping young people excluded from school. Where was he in banging on the desk and demanding that from the Chancellor? The Chancellor will come along, I guarantee, and put in a couple of hundred million here, or £30 or £40 million there, spread over five years, and people will have to bid for it. It is not enough. It is not sufficient to meet the scale of the problem.

Every single Member in this House, whichever side they are on, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker—I know you are neutral, but this applies to you as well—will have in their constituency community organisations and youth groups that work with young people who are challenged and difficult. In Nottingham, to give three examples, we have the Nottingham School of Boxing, the Pythian Club, and the Groundwork Greater Nottingham Trust. They are scrumming around for money, yet they are some of the most effective people in stopping young people becoming captured by the criminals or getting them out of criminality. They cannot get a few pounds—it is unbelievable. It is pathetic. I do not care what the Chancellor says about his fiscal rules. They are millions—it is unbelievable. It is pathetic. I do not care if he is fortunate, his injuries are declared non-life-threatening; his injuries are life-changing; he is critical; or his injuries have proved fatal. I receive that email regularly, and often the victim is younger than 17 years of age. I very rarely received emails like that before a couple of years ago.

Many of my constituents tell me how worried they are about the rise in serious violent crime in Enfield. On Saturday morning, I held a community meeting on Enfield Island Village that was very well attended because it was specifically about serious violent crime, and particularly youth crime. There is huge concern among people for not only their own safety but that of young people, who are lying stabbed or dead on our streets. They have very good reason to be concerned. Stabbings and shootings relating to drug dealing and county lines activity, as well as muggings and robberies, have seen violent crime in Enfield soar by more than 90% since 2010—yes, 90%. If I had said 10 years ago that that would be the case, people would have thought it was a massive exaggeration.

Last year, more than 20 violent crimes against the person were committed every day in the borough of Enfield. Enfield has the third highest level of serious youth violence in the capital, and we have a problem with gangs, county lines, knife crime and organised crime. I know from meeting the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that tackling serious violence in Enfield is a top priority for the police. We have seen the deployment of extra officers from the Met police’s violent crime taskforce and the Territorial Support Group to help make our streets safer, but frankly, if an area qualifies for deployment of police from those two groups, it has a very serious problem on its streets. We should not have to rely on those specialist services. We need visible neighbourhood policing at the heart of our communities, because the best way to cut crime is to have more bobbies on the beat.

The creation of safer neighbourhood teams helped to cut violent crime across the country by over 40%, but those invaluable teams are now much reduced and under existential threat because of this Government’s irresponsible decision to slash police budgets. Since the Government were elected in 2010, the Met police’s budget has been cut by £850 million. Despite the recent
Leading crime prevention charities such as Safer London and excellent projects such as the Godwin Lawson Foundation and the Jubilee centre are working in Enfield, alongside local schools, in providing early intervention programmes and mentoring schemes to educate and support young people. However, as we have already heard from the hon. Member for Gedling, these organisations are working on shoestring budgets, and they need funding and support to scale up and focus on their work, rather than continually having to go out with the begging bowl. It is the first responsibility of Government to protect and safeguard the lives of their citizens.

I want to pay tribute to Inspector Paul Dwyer and PC Mansbridge of Enfield and Haringey police, who work with our young people in the north area basic command unit of the Met. Recently, they organised a charity youth football tournament, with 200 young people taking part in seven-a-side matches all day long, and the day communicated an anti-knife crime message.

We are proud of our young people, but we are not giving them the chance they need. I hope that Ministers will think long and hard about the issues that have been raised today by me and so many colleagues. They need to make it a priority to tackle serious violence and put the funding of our police, councils and public services back on a sustainable footing. Over the past nine years, we have seen this Government’s policy put the safety of our communities at risk. Enfield residents have the right to feel safe and be safe in their homes and in their neighbourhoods, and to know that their children are safe inside and outside school and in their parks, and to know that they have good activities—with good adult role models looking after them—that they can take part in. That is what we need; it is not rocket science. We all know it, and we need this Government to step up.

5.38 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I pay tribute to the excellent speakers we have heard so far, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who is no longer in her place. From the point of view of the lives of two young people, she explained the difference that adequate resources across swathes of the public sector makes to the life chances of children, as well as the cost to the public purse. I could not put it any better, and her speech will remain in my memory for a long time to come.

In my constituency in the past year, we have seen an increase in muggings at knife point. In March in Isleworth, a 17-year-old man was knifed and tragically died. It seems to be the case that most of the victims and perpetrators were teenagers, starting out on life. The perpetrators were known to some of the victims; they were part of a tit-for-tat feud, perhaps drugs-related. Other incidents were random attacks on young people for their phones or bank cards. Hounslow, my borough, has one of the lowest levels of violent crime incidents in London, but that does not really feel good to my constituents because violent crime has increased overall everywhere, including in Hounslow. At least the Home Secretary has admitted that fact.

The police have clearly been the focus of debates on violent crime and knife crime, which is where I am focusing my speech, but we cannot just talk about the police in terms of responses to persistent crime and
crime incidents, particularly in certain areas. Those responses work well where the police work with other agencies. For instance, following a spate of muggings on Chiswick High Road, serious offenders with police, the council, local businesses, youth workers and so on to find solutions, and it really worked. Between a public meeting held in December in response to the attacks and the follow-up meeting in March, the number of incidents had gone down to zero. However, the problem is that the police in London are working with one hand behind their back. Extra patrols in one hotspot are viable only until another hotspot is identified elsewhere and the police have to be moved on to work there. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford described the cost to the public purse and police time of every serious injury and murder from violent crime. She asked: could not that time—that resource—be better spent? Of course it could.

We are starting from the baseline of serious police cuts—3,000 fewer police officers in London, or more than 80 fewer in the Borough of Hounslow. We have seen a similar cut in the number of local police community support officers, so that the ward teams half their staff in 2010. That is as a direct result of the one-third cut in Government grant to the London Mayor's budget. By 2022, the Metropolitan police will have lost about £1 billion in funding since 2010. The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, is doing what he can and he is contributing to frontline policing, but the scale of the cuts causes delays in responding to crime, less outreach and less community policing, where officers get to know the youngsters on their patch.

I am really pleased that the Mayor of London has adopted the public health model. He has learned from the experience in Glasgow, which has been mentioned. He has put some money back into the Metropolitan police budget—£234 million—which has brought back some extra police officers, but nothing like as many as we have lost. Even if the police were funded at the same level as in 2010, we all know that credible action by the police working in conjunction with others is not the solution. It may simply move the problem. Perhaps the police are succeeding in lock up serious offenders, which puts them out of action for a while, but actually, by the time the police are involved with a young person, whether the victim or an alleged perpetrator, it is too late. The police are dealing with the symptoms of the problems, not what has gone wrong.

To understand the impact of cuts in my constituency, as a result of the trigger-point incidents I have met local police, headteachers, school and college students, councillors and many others. I wanted to know what my constituents felt about the rising incidence of knife crime, so in April I hosted a crime summit in Isleworth—it was already being planned before the tragic murder. I am also currently distributing a crime survey to ask local people about their experience of serious youth crime, as well as their views on the causes and solutions and on support for young people and their parents. I have already received a lot of replies. People want action. They see the impact of crime on their community and on their children. They want to make a difference, but they want the Government to take action and to commit real funding to the places where it is needed.

In one response to one of the questions, “What do you think is the cause of the problem?” was written the word “criminals”, but we all know that we cannot put people into pigeonholes and define one group of young people as criminals and everybody else as the public. I think everybody in this debate and all the other respondents to my survey understand that. In the survey, the issue of police numbers was frequently raised. People know that the police are under-resourced and they see the pressure that is putting on services such as crime reporting, police-community engagement and so on.

The most common issue raised in the survey was the lack of and cuts to youth services. People see youth services as part of a range of solutions. They are not just something for children to do after school while they wait for their parents to come home. They are a place for children to socialise, meet responsible role models, learn a skill or a sport and touch base with somebody who can help them with their problems. They are a place for counselling services, homework clubs and so on. Those things need a base, which has to be open at the time and on days when children need them. I was very upset to hear a Government Member talk about youth clubs not being nine-to-five. Good quality, well funded youth clubs do not just open after school during the week; they are open at weekends and during the holidays.

As I said, my constituents do not label those caught up in crime as someone else’s fault or as someone else’s child. That became clear when several mothers raised with me their worries about their own youngsters, asking themselves, “Is my child at risk of getting caught up? Are they carrying a knife, whether for protection or planned use?” The reality is that it makes little difference if a child is maimed or killed. One other worrying thing we are finding is anecdotal evidence that, faced with stop-and-search, girls are carrying knives for the boys. Parents want a safe space to share their concerns about their children.

Young people told me that in almost all cases the youngsters they knew—they may or may not have been speaking for themselves—who were at risk or were involved in gang activities, carrying knives and so on, were doing so reluctantly. It was not their voluntary choice. They were often caught up in something. One example involved a young person who had no food at home because there was no money to buy food. Hanging around after school or college outside a chicken shop, somebody said, “You a bit hungry, mate? I’ll buy you a meal.” “Oh, okay, fine.” That young person was then caught up: “When are you going to pay me back?” That is just one simple example of how easy it is for young people who do not have any money, who have time on their hands or are looking for role models, to get caught up in gang and non-consensual activity. That just illustrates why we need better quality early intervention.

Every headteacher and school manager I have spoken to over the past three years, often about school cuts, has told me that the impact of the real-terms cuts on their schools, including primary schools, has meant that too often they have had to cut services such as welfare, counselling, mental health support, affordable after-school activities and so on—all the things that they know keep children positively occupied. We all remember what a teacher said the other day on “Question Time” on the BBC when she challenged the Minister. She said that teachers know who these young people are, so they would prefer that, rather than giving them more work to do, the Home Secretary supported them in the work they are trying to do with the children who are vulnerable.
The silo nature of Government does not help. It is good that the Home Office team and their Opposition shadows are leading the debate, but where are the Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education or the Department of Health and Social Care? It is not just the responsibility of the Home Secretary and the Home Office.

Funding is at the centre of this issue across the country, whether in cities or towns, urban or rural areas, for local authorities, police services, charities or other services. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, said that the Home Office is providing new funds of around £35 million annually, but that should be set against the £768 million cut per annum on youth services across the country. The figures for all of the Home Secretary’s wonderful new projects come to only 5% of the cuts made to youth services. Local authorities used to receive a substantial amount of their total income from MHCLG, yet those grants have been cut by more than 50%, and more in areas of greater deprivation.

As has been said in numerous debates in this place, cuts to local government have meant cuts to all services, particularly non-statutory services, of which youth services are among the most prominent. Let us have no illusions about these politically driven austerity policies. Austerity is not about economic necessity; it is about cutting the public sector. When the public sector is cut, there are cuts to youth services, police services, education and so on.

Early interventions, such as children’s centres, basic welfare and early counselling, benefit most the young people who are at the greatest risk of being victims or perpetrators of crime. We need to see them restored. We need more school nurses and specialist mental health services in schools, as well as local counselling services. Cuts to leisure services mean that pools and sports centres may stay open, but only if the price rises beyond the pocket of young people from low-income families, so again they are excluded.

Too many communities are having to deal with the heartbreaking impact of violent crime, and the Government are still being too slow to act. I appreciate that the Home Secretary acknowledges the seriousness of the issue, but Ministers cannot just offer warm words. One-off funding announcements are a drop in the ocean compared with the funding lost to youth services, schools, colleges, the police and so on. That is the real issue that needs addressing. We need sustained investment in our communities in early intervention, youth clubs and frontline policing. The warm words of Conservative Members are meaningless when their austerity is the root of the problem.

5.52 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate following a visit to my local police station last week—in a professional capacity, of course.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): For a change.

Justin Madders: For a change.

Like the majority of hon. Members here, I have regular dialogue with my local police. Last week’s conversation was mainly about what they had been doing to tackle a noticeable spike in youth disorder in Ellesmere Port in the last year or so. Indeed, recorded crime figures for Cheshire as a whole show a rise in public order offences of 55% in one year up to June 2018, which I found astonishing.

That meeting was useful as a constituency Member to hear not only about what they considered were the local challenges and hot spots, but about their wider perspective on what they consider their challenges and the impediments to doing their job. I was left with a strong impression that the police do a fantastic job. Indeed, as a result of the action they have taken through banning orders, dispersal orders and so on there has been a reduction in antisocial behaviour. Thankfully, in my constituency we have not had the epidemic of knife crime seen in many other parts of the country, but the disturbances we have had have been hugely destructive for those on the receiving end, and they have taken up a disproportionate amount of police time. The police are essentially undertaking a damage-limitation exercise. They have the dispiriting knowledge that they can haul in a young person for questioning and even go through the youth justice system, but nothing will change the behaviour of the hard core of youths until they are fully within the criminal justice system.

I understand that we need proper processes and justice, and that for most youngsters their first contact with the police will be their last, but I also know from what my local police say that they can predict with alarming accuracy which 14 and 15-year-olds they come across will be behind bars by the age of 20. That represents a failure not only of the criminal justice system but of our society. To understand the reason for that failure we must look not just at how these kids are dealt with when they come into contact with the authorities but at what drives them to the point where at the age of 14 there appears to be a sad inevitability about where their lives will end up.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) said, we know that adverse childhood experiences can provide clues to adult behaviour, but we should also think about how decisions we make here have an impact. As we have heard from several Members, there is a clear link between the spike in youth-related violence in the last year or two and the decimation of the public sector that started just under a decade ago. It started with the culling of Sure Start centres, continued in the stretched social services, and ends with councils drastically reducing their youth provision. There is ample evidence of the damage done by austerity that does not appear on the balance sheet.

My local police have been doing a fantastic job with diversionary activities, and that has had some effect on reducing antisocial behaviour, but the point they make to me—and fairly so—is that every pound they spend on such activities is a pound less they can spend on putting bobbies on the beat. In the context of their having a net funding loss of £40 million since 2010, and with 200 fewer police officers and PCSOs since then, they know better than most that every penny counts. As we have heard, nationally we have the lowest numbers of police for three decades. Since 2010, we have lost...
about 20,000 police officers. It is unsustainable to carry on in this way. As the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police said:

"I would be naive to say that the reduction in police finances over the last few years, not just in London but beyond, hasn’t had an impact."

Yet here we are again talking about the same issues.

We have all paid a price for the police cuts; it is to the credit of the police that despite those cuts they have found funding for diversionary activities in my constituency. It is the sort of thing that should be provided by the council, but we know how many local authorities have had their budgets slashed in the past decade, as we have heard from many Members. On top of the increased demand on social care, such discretionary services are inevitably the ones to drop off. Figures obtained by the all-party group on knife crime show that the average council cut in real-terms to spending on youth services has been about 40% over the past three years. Some have actually reduced it by 91%. A study of local authority expenditure on youth services shows that it has fallen by £880 million in real terms since 2010-11.

There is a clear connection between where we are now and what has happened to public services over the past decade, but changes can be made that require not money but a different approach. There is a cohort of young people who feel they are untouchable, for whom the prospect of arrest holds no fear and the prospect of being taken home by the police and having to answer to their family is not a problem. These are the ringleaders, the hard core, who the local police tell me have to be taken through a series of hoops aimed at improving behaviour but for whom they know such voluntary interventions will do nothing until they get to the compulsory order stage. However, it can take up to a year before those orders can be obtained—a year during which the individual can continue to wreak havoc on their local community. We need earlier compulsory interventions: deal with the ringleaders early on and the rest will soon drop away.

We need to take a long, hard look at how we can do more to stop young people going down this road at a much earlier age. It means no more off-rolling by schools of difficult pupils; it means a joined-up approach by all those involved with families in need; and it means a more intensive focus on diversionary activities at a much younger age. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), and the work that she has done in the Youth Violence Commission. I remember when she launched the commission, many years ago. At that time, I was the cabinet member for community safety in Lewisham Council. It was a well-turned-out launch—at London South Bank University, if my memory serves me correctly. My hon. Friend has given me a nod.

I was the cabinet member for community safety in my police area of Cheshire, there has been a 45% rise in violent crime in the last year. I do not know how much of that is down to domestic violence, but certainly the number of local authority safeguarding referrals which have included a domestic abuse element has increased significantly, and is well above the regional average.

If I can stand up here and say that there has been a 45% rise in violent crime in my police area in one year, that represents a crisis. It represents an emergency. It represents something about which we ought to be doing more in the House. I do not want us to reach a point at which stabbings and murders on the streets become the norm, because if we accept that as a society, we in this place have absolutely failed.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about the empty Benches. That sends an appalling message about priorities in this place. It is clear from what Members have been saying that they believe there is a crisis that we cannot continue to ignore. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) mentioned the 10,000 children who are operating in county lines. A whole generation of kids have been written off because of Government inaction. As my hon. Friend said, this is an emergency, but because the Government have been eaten up from the inside by their own individual issues, they have become a dysfunctional, failing Government—a Government who have failed our entire country.

Crises of this kind, and the discussions that we are having now, ought to have a much better audience here, and much better action. The fact that we have such a shambolic, disengaged Government suggests to me that they have no right to be in charge of the country any more, because they have let people down completely. The idea that they are the party of law and order is an absolute joke. The messages that we have heard from Members on both sides of the House today need to be taken on board and acted on, because this is a crisis that we cannot allow to continue.

6.1 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak.

I want to acknowledge the speeches that have been made by Members on both sides of the House, but I particularly want to acknowledge the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), and the work that she has done in the Youth Violence Commission. I remember when she launched the commission, many years ago. At that time, I was the cabinet member for community safety in Lewisham Council. It was a well-turned-out launch—at London South Bank University, if my memory serves me correctly. My hon. Friend has given me a nod.

I also want to acknowledge the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). One thing that he said really stuck in my mind. He said that some young people were more afraid of gangsters than they were of the police. That gave me a sense of the gravity of the situation, and of the pressure, manipulation and oppression to which young people are being subjected. We must not fall short of acknowledging that young people do not start out in life saying, “I want to get involved in crime.” I want to carry a knife.” They start out in life saying, “I want to be a police officer”, or “I want to be a fireman.” They have dreams. We need to help young people to succeed in their dreams and their visions, and to make a way for them as much as possible.

When I consider serious violence, I often think about knife crime. I think about young people, their vulnerability, and the risk of harm to them and to others. However,
serious violence is not just about young people, and knife crime is not just associated with young people. In London, we are seeing a lower volume of knife crime but a higher harm rate, which is affecting young people significantly and causing fatalities. Figures from the Metropolitan police show that in 2017-18 there were 14,700 recorded crimes involving knives or sharp instruments, the highest number over the last 10 years. The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic young people who have been victims or perpetrators of knife crime—or have been involved in “joint enterprise”—has also increased, which is of great concern.

Young people and knife crime are my focus. When referring to young black people’s experience of the police, Robert Reiner, a retired lecturer from the London School of Economics, states that they experience over-policing and under-protection. I am genuinely concerned about the information that the Home Secretary has presented to us about increasing the section 60 stop-and-search powers.

The Scarman inquiry and the Macpherson inquiry talked about the tensions that can be created within communities and how they can affect our society. We need to think seriously about how we reach young people and help them to have trust in the police, so they go to them when they need their help. I do not think it is right to start on the offensive by stopping and searching young people. For me—I know there are many like-minded people and organisations—it is about building trust and relationships with young people, and about getting to know them. Only then will young people and their communities start to think and feel that they can go to the police when they experience harm or terror, which we need to encourage as much as possible.

I remember, as a young child, knowing my local bobby—I use that term endearingly. He used to come to our house and have a cup of tea. We all knew him and he was trusted in our local community. We had a very good experience of that. For that reason, we need more community police officers.

Some of the police’s attitudes and behaviour towards young black people need to change. That is not a new phenomenon. All young people need to know that they can expect help, support and protection from the police. Instead of carrying a knife for protection, they should be able to seek police protection confidently, as I have mentioned. For many young people, however, that is far from the truth. There has been some progress in many police forces across the country, but borough commanders move so quickly from one area to another that they hardly have time to implement what they have begun.

Serious violence is a complex problem that is not only about policing; there are many other contributing factors. That said, as we have already heard, young people need to feel like they have a voice and that their views are heard and valued. We must also remember that they are young, even though they can look much older.

I welcome the Government’s serious violence strategy, which the Home Office published last April. It attempts to look at the root cause of the problem and support young people to lead productive lives away from violence. Much more needs to be done, however, to support young people and their families where they experience deprivation and disadvantage in our society. Much more also needs to be done for looked-after children and care leavers, who rank highly in our prisons.

That is why we need to consider taking a public health approach for our young people. The strategy has been praised for its focus on early intervention and prevention. It is a holistic approach to truly combating the problem, which involves families and issues such as identity, a sense of belonging and young people’s wellbeing and mental health. It is about making structural changes to multiple systems and agencies, including the policing of young people, health services, youth services, housing, education and the criminal justice system.

I applaud Lewisham Council for developing its own public health approach against a backdrop of limited funds. In reviewing the public health approach, the Government might like to take some advice from our local authority about the strategy it has already developed. The public health approach needs to be taken more seriously, and there needs to be investment in youth services provision and the third sector.

Spending on youth services has fallen by 70% under the Government, which has affected the Grove Park youth club in my constituency. The club closed in 2013 as central Government cuts meant that the council could no longer afford to maintain it. Its catchment area encompasses around 7,000 young people, and it is situated in one of Lewisham’s most deprived wards. On the local estate, two incidents of serious youth stabbings have been recorded in the period since the youth club closed. Government statistics show that crime in the club’s catchment area rose between 2010 and 2015 despite an overall reduction in crime in the borough. I support bringing this much-needed club back into use; it should be given consideration as part of the Government-led public health approach.

In the meantime, I would like to pay tribute to the model of a mobile community youth service called XLP, which is being used in my constituency, and to Ubuntu, a third sector organisation that supports parents and young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in my constituency. They are both doing well at making the kind of sustained interventions in young people’s lives that make a real difference, also against a backdrop of minimal resources. As we have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, third sector organisations such as these should not be “scrimping around” for money. The funding should be in place, because they are making a significant difference in reducing serious youth crime andempowering young people and their families. The Government could learn something from those two fantastic organisations and would do well to invest further in the third sector as well as increasing spending in local government for young people’s provisions and launching a public health approach to serious youth violence.

6.11 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This has been a fantastic and wide-ranging debate, with truly excellent contributions from both sides of the House. It has demonstrated the complexity of the factors and causes behind serious violence, and the genuine crisis that is enveloping communities across the country. We heard from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about the excellent public
health model that is being championed in Scotland, from which lessons are being learned across England and Wales. He also talked about the policy implications of treating violence as a disease.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has been mentioned many times today. She is a true champion of the policy requirements relating to youth violence, and she is also the chair of the Youth Violence Commission. She made an incredibly powerful speech about the repeated patterns and characteristics of adverse childhood experiences. She gave us two “Sliding Doors” scenarios of young men growing up in vulnerable situations. One was unable to get the help he needed, but the other, who was similarly vulnerable, was able to access support structures and systems under an active, interventionist and caring approach that would prevent him from falling into violence or becoming a victim of violence himself. That reminded me of a young man in my own constituency, for whom I was desperately trying to get help. Sadly, his life was lost at the hands of another child in a similar way to that described by my hon. Friend.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), spoke about her Committee’s inquiry into serious violence. Crucially, it is taking note of the voices of young people, many of whom do not have a trusted police officer attached to their school or models of neighbourhood policing that they can respond to and get to know. She spoke about the need for the scale and pace of Government action to match the scale and pace of the violence that we are seeing. We have heard from many speakers today that the Government are not showing any signs of urgency in their response to the violence that is enveloping the country. My right hon. Friend gave examples of the evidence being given to her Committee, including quotes from senior police officers who said that the Government were more interested in narrative than in action, and from Louise Casey, who described the Government’s strategy as “woefully inadequate”.

The hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) drew on their personal experience in the youth service and emphasised the need for education and prevention. It has been a reassuring theme—the focus on the need for early intervention and prevention. I think that there is cross-party agreement that that is essential, in addition to a strong criminal justice response.

There has been a huge focus on the cuts to youth services. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) spoke about the cuts in her constituency and the increasing number of both children in care and exclusions. She pointed out that, although there have of course been spikes in youth violence under previous Governments, we have not had such a vulnerable cohort of young people at risk of falling into violence. There has been a sustained, year-on-year trend of growth in serious violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke about Gwent police’s excellent work. It is important to acknowledge the excellent initiatives in some police forces. I congratulate the Welsh Government on their “one public service” approach, their focus on adverse childhood experiences and their commitment to developing trauma-informed public services. She made the point, as we have all done, that resources are required to make that partnership working effective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) gave his usual impassioned speech on the subject and called on the Home Secretary—it is great that he is here today—to come to the House more often to update us on his work and the Government’s progress, to convene Cobra and to show the urgency that the House clearly demands. There are 2,000 county lines with 10,000 children involved. The Government simply do not feel the urgency that that clearly demands.

The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) talked about 700 young victims of knife crime last year in the west midlands and the £106 million in reserves that he believes West Midlands police are sitting on. I believe that he knows that that figure is from 2017 and that the actual figure is £43 million of available reserves, which is intended to fall to £30 million simply to balance the books. His police and crime commissioner intends to use all non-essential reserves by 2020-21.

Julian Knight: The hon. Lady should understand that that related to the point at which the police and crime commissioner decided to close Solihull police station. At that point, there was £106 million in reserves.

Louise Haigh: But at that point, the police and crime commissioner already had a plan to use all available reserves purely to balance the books because of continued central Government cuts since 2010. I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he would rather see frontline officers on the beat, responding to violent crime, or police stations open. That is the invidious position that sustained central Government cuts have put police and crime commissioners in.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said he was disappointed that we voted against the police funding settlement earlier this year. I am sorry to have disappointed him. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) promised him that I would explain why the precept is a fundamentally unfair way to fund police forces. West Yorkshire has double the population of Surrey and four times the level of violent crime, yet through the Government’s police funding settlement, the two can raise exactly the same amount through the precept. Through the same police funding settlement, South Yorkshire can raise 12% of the money lost since 2010, whereas Dorset can raise 32%. It is unjustifiable to for money to be raised in a way that has no bearing on levels of crime or demand on the police.

Douglas Ross: I want to be absolutely clear, because I would not like someone to read the start of the debate in Hansard and then wonder what had happened at the end. It was not me who made that point. I think that the hon. Lady is referring to someone on the Front Bench. It was definitely not the point I was making, because we do not have PCCs in Scotland.

Louise Haigh: I think that the hon. Gentleman might have misheard me. I did not say anything about PCCs. He mentioned earlier that he was disappointed that we had voted against the settlement, and I am explaining exactly why: it is a fundamentally unfair way to fund the police and has no bearing on demand.
The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) built on her admirable campaigning work on county lines and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, talked about the excellent work of community groups in all our constituencies, but said that they were scraping by from year to year and competing for confusing and small pots of money.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) spoke about the tragic deaths of teenagers in her constituency and the fact that the police are working with at least one hand tied behind their back, lurching from one hotspot to another. The system is not as effective as it could be with sustained neighbourhood policing models in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) built on the valuable experience of speaking to frontline officers in his constituency and spoke about them telling him how, from a very young age, they can predict which children are in danger of becoming involved in gangs, which he rightly says is a failure of the criminal justice system and, indeed, society.

My hon. Friend touched on domestic abuse, which has largely been missing from today’s debate. When I visit young offender institutions meet young offenders and, one of the most consistent factors in their backgrounds is coming from a household of domestic abuse. We welcome the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and I take this opportunity to thank all the Members who have signed my letter today calling for an investigation into domestic abuse and the family courts. If we continue to allow children to grow up in households of domestic abuse, all we are doing is creating the next generation of young offenders.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) gave a powerful perspective on behalf of communities that are over-policed, and she spoke about the consequences for those communities of failing to build trust and relationships with the police. She also spoke about looked-after children and care leavers, who are over-represented in our criminal justice system.

Those contributions show the breadth of policy areas on which the public health approach undeniably has to focus.

Last month’s crime statistics reveal the extent of the crisis before us today. As we have heard, never since records began have we recorded incidents of violent crime been as high as they are today, yet police numbers stand at their lowest level for three decades—per population, the lowest level ever. It is important to reiterate why police numbers are important to tackling violent crime.

First, the fall in police officer numbers inevitably forces the police to refocus their resources on reactive policing. More crucially, local policing increases the legitimacy of the police, which encourages local communities to provide intelligence, report crime and work with the police proactively. That has been a massive failure of the past nine years of austerity. The cut to neighbourhood policing has seriously damaged community relations.

Policing matters—of course it does—but, as we have heard, the Government can hope to bear down on serious violence only if they bear down on the factors that lie behind it. The story of violence, and particularly youth violence, is at its heart a question of vulnerability. Children who fall behind are now denied the speech and language therapy they desperately need. Sure Start, a lifetime for many vulnerable parents, has been cut back, and the support it used to provide has been reduced. As children grow older, they are being routinely denied the talking therapies, cognitive behavioural therapies and other psychological support that we know can reduce aggression and delinquency.

Schools, crushed under the weight of punitive funding pressures, have focused their cost-cutting on exactly the kind of targeted support needed by young people who are falling behind, including teaching assistants and special educational needs. Families are being denied intensive therapies that improve parenting skills, strengthen family cohesion and increase young people’s engagement, and that are known to reduce out-of-home placements and reoffending.

Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and, regrettably, insist that the problem appeared from nowhere. We have never heard any Minister accept that a reduction in support services, a substantial cut in youth services and slashing the police to levels per head never seen before has made the blindest bit of difference. If they cannot accept their responsibility, how can we trust them to put things right?

On early intervention and prevention, what is replacing the £880 million-worth of complex provision and support for young people and the £500 million lost from Sure Start? An early intervention fund of £17 million a year and a youth endowment fund of £20 million a year. Each has been shown to be inadequate in its own way, and they are not even close to meeting the challenges faced by communities.

Some 73% of bids to the early intervention youth fund have been rejected by the Government, communities in the west midlands have been deprived of a vital project to tackle county lines exploitation, and Greater Manchester has been deprived of funding to support families against crime. In Durham, and across the country, it is the same story in violent crime hotspots. How can the Government look at this evidence and say that their efforts to tackle the problem are even close to matching the challenge?

As we have heard, the Government have launched a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence, but it is far from clear how that will differ from or go beyond the duties already placed on agencies under crime and disorder reduction partnerships or under “Working Together to Safeguard Children” guidance. A true public health approach requires a resourced, co-ordinated, cross-Government strategy led by the Prime Minister, as we have repeatedly called for. The taskforce mentioned by the Home Secretary today, and chaired by him, has met once, and, so far no actions have been announced.

We are in a state of emergency, with the most despicable criminals exploiting the space where well-run and effective early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies once existed. The pursuit of young children by gangs is now a systematic and well-rehearsed business model, according to the Children’s Commissioner. It is a national crisis that demands a sense of urgency, but that is not being felt from this Government. We cannot allow this drift. We need Ministers to step up to the plate, we need
leadership from the Prime Minister, we need resources and we need concerted, sustained action from the Government.

6.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): No young person chooses to carry a knife out of an innate desire for violence and bloodshed. Knives are carried for protection, or to belong, or because young people feel that gang membership and criminality are their only route to success and respect.

Quite rightly, we have heard from hon. Members today about the impact of adverse childhood experiences. The hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvonneial Shaddick) gave a chilling account of the differences in life chances—what she called the sliding doors of a young man’s life. She will, I am sure, welcome the fact that the Leader of the House of Commons, who is an expert in early years work—she has spent much of her life examining the first two years of life and development—is focusing a piece of work for the Government on precisely the first two years of life. That will have an important role to play in the future, when it comes to how we as a Government ensure that young people have the chances that we all hope and expect they will.

The hon. Lady will also be pleased to know that around £7 million has been awarded to the four police forces in Wales, which, in collaboration with Public Health Wales, will develop and test a new approach to policing that prevents and mitigates adverse childhood experiences. That is just one of the 61 commitments from the serious violence strategy, which has been completed, and I am sure we will all welcome the outcome of that vital work.

Hon. Members mentioned the impact of domestic abuse. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), outlined, the Government are bringing forward a groundbreaking piece of legislation. The draft Domestic Abuse Bill is currently being scrutinised before a Joint Committee of both Houses. That is precisely because, when it comes before the House, we want it to be a good piece of legislation that meets the high expectations of everyone on both sides of the House, not just in helping survivors and children in the immediate term—I include children as survivors in that—but because we know that domestic abuse is a primary factor in making a child more susceptible to being a perpetrator or a victim of violence.

At the Prime Minister’s summit only a few weeks ago, we heard from a professor from Chicago—there is an international aspect to our work as well, which I will come on to in due course—who told us that domestic violence in the home, whether in the States, in the UK or wherever, is the biggest indicator that someone will perpetrate violence, or be a victim of violence, outside the home. Of course, that makes complete sense. If someone grows up in an environment of abuse, not only does that have an impact on the way in which their brain grows and develops, but it must have an impact on how they handle themselves with the wider public and outside. Of course, it also terrifies the children who live in such households.

The reason why I am so pleased that we have been talking about adverse childhood experiences, domestic abuse and so on is that this is as much about life chances as about the causes of criminality, drug gangs and so on. The fact is that young people growing up without life chances are just as likely to become a victim of knife crime as a perpetrator. They want a way out. They want the chance of a life without violence. We must give them a dream of a future. That was one of the strongest themes that came out of the Prime Minister’s serious violence summit, and that is why the serious violence strategy places such strong emphasis on early intervention, tackling the root causes of violent crime and preventing young people from being drawn into violence in the first place.

Members understandably want to debate this issue; I hope people realise that I positively welcome opportunities to be at the Dispatch Box to discuss this incredibly important topic, but I also believe that we should be listening to young people. That is precisely why I am inviting young people with lived experience, including former gang members, into this place so that they can tell us about their experiences, what they think we should be doing and what they think will make a difference.

I thank Members for their considered, careful and thoughtful contributions. I have to say that I consider this afternoon to have been the norm for the way in which Members conduct themselves in these debates. There is an acknowledgement that Members from all parties want serious violence to stop and want to work together to help to stop it, which is why it is always a privilege for me to respond to these debates, but I want to go further: in due course I shall issue an invitation to all Members, from all parties, to a roundtable at the beginning of next month to discuss further what is happening, and not only at the national level.

This is an incredibly complex policy area—I shall give the House a list of some of the things we are doing in due course, but there is so much more to this. As colleagues from the all-party group on knife crime will know from when I have discussed this issue with them, this is not just about debates in the House; it is about us talking about what we can do and about the best practice we can share. I want to understand what Members think is working in their local areas.

Huw Merriman: The Minister will have heard from Opposition and Government Members the disappointment at the lack of attendance of this debate; when she reaches out to every single MP, will she consider whether every single MP could partner with a youth centre in or around London, so that we can work closely with those youth centres and they can work closely with us? That might bring more people into this sphere.

Victoria Atkins: That is a really great idea for which I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who did so much in his past to work with young people. It is ideas of that sort that can really help to make a difference. I remember that in a previous debate, or it might have been an urgent question, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about how we, as Members of Parliament, are leaders in our local communities. We can help our local communities by understanding the resources available and the help and best practice that is out there, to really drive change in our local communities.

I think we all acknowledge that the creation of life chances for young people will require patience, hard work and commitment. It is not a quick fix. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford...
(Yvette Cooper), who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, rightly asked me, as part of her scrutiny of the work of Government, about the number of children at risk—the scale of the problem. My answer is that so many factors are at play—indeed, the serious violence strategy identifies 22 risk factors for children, which are balanced alongside protective factors that can mitigate those risk factors—that can determine whether a child is at risk of serious violence.

Let me give some examples of those factors. According to the Children's Commissioner, some 27,000 children have identified themselves as being members of gangs. Some 7,720 pupils were excluded in 2016-17. Members will know that excluded pupils are over-represented in the population of perpetrators and victims of serious violence. Some 86,000 children have a parent in prison. Now, we are not saying for a moment that each and every one of those children is at significant risk of being either a perpetrator or a victim of knife crime, because no one factor alone determines that. They may have hugely mitigating protective factors that draw them away from the web of violence, but this is the complexity of it. This is the detail that we in the Home Office—my officials—have spent much time examining, not only in the past. Since the strategy was published, but in the months before that, when the strategy was being prepared. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) emphasised, this is urgent and it requires urgent action. That is why we have put in place not only immediate action to tackle knife crime and serious violence, but action in medium and longer-term strategies.

In the immediate term, we have established a National County Lines Coordination Centre to tackle the violent and exploitative activity associated with the county lines drugs trade. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) noted the exponential rise in county lines and the fact that drug gangs respect no geographical borders. That point was also emphasised by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who again referenced adverse childhood experiences.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who tirelessly campaigns for a police station in his metropolitan borough, also set out the complex policing challenges that living next to a major metropolitan city can and does have for his local police force.

Let me go back to the County Lines Coordination Centre and give Members an idea of the scale of the problem.

**Julian Knight:** Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Labour police and crime commissioner to retain Solihull police station in the light of the fact that he has recently saved the police station in Sutton Coldfield, another Conservative seat? By the way, the only two police stations that were set to close were in two Conservative seats in the west midlands.

**Victoria Atkins:** If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I wish the police well in using them. We do return to the fact that, of course, such decisions are a matter for the police and crime commissioner. We are often keen to make the point that the reason we have police and crime commissioners is that they are accountable to the local population that they serve.

In the few months that the National County Lines Coordination Centre has been in operation, it has already seen more than 1,000 arrests and more than 1,300 vulnerable people safeguarded. That shows not only the complexity of the problem, but the scale of it. It is one reason why we have introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill, which, I hope, will receive Royal Assent tomorrow.

**Vernon Coaker rose—**

**Victoria Atkins:** If I may just continue. The Bill strengthens the legislation on guns, knives and corrosive substances. In addition, we have brought forward amendments to that Bill to introduce knife crime prevention orders to reach those children most at risk. I came in for a little bit of criticism, it is fair to say, from Opposition Members that these were put into the Bill without enough scrutiny. The point is that we were acting urgently in response to the police who had asked us for these orders. They said, “Please give them to us. Let’s pilot them and see what happens with them.” To my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), I say that the pilot will start in London in the autumn. We will ensure that we have good guidance for these new powers, and we very much wish the police well in using them.

**Vernon Coaker:** I am sorry that I am slightly interrupting the flow of the Minister’s speech, which is why I tried to intervene at a particular point a minute ago, but I thank her for the courtesy of giving way.

On national priorities and national agencies to tackle crime, what will she and the Home Secretary say to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about Lynne Owens’s demand yesterday for £2.7 billion of extra money? This is very serious, and the Minister must not prevaricate. That is the head of the National Crime Agency saying that £2.7 billion is needed. If the Minister were to say from that Dispatch Box that that is what she and the Home Secretary will ask the Chancellor for, she would find the rest of Parliament supporting her.

**Victoria Atkins:** Of course, we take that very, very seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know, with his experience as a Minister, that the Home Secretary meets not just the director of the NCA, but other very senior police and law enforcement officers regularly. This is very much part of an ongoing discussion. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has already ensured that we have extra funding for the police and for serious organised crime. There is, of course, the spending review coming up, and the message is heard and understood. The hon. Gentleman did challenge the Home Secretary and—I think—me to bang the table a bit. I do not want to put words—or actions, as it were—into the Home Secretary’s mouth, but it is fair to say that he listened to the concerns of chief constables and police and crime commissioners, and made an impassioned case to the Chancellor, to which the Chancellor listened very carefully.

In his spring statement, the Chancellor provided an extra £100 million to deal specifically with serious violence, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Gedling will be pleased that more than £1.5 million of that is going to Nottinghamshire police.
Reacting to feedback from the police, we have announced changes to section 60 stop-and-search powers to make it simpler for officers in seven force areas to use the powers in anticipation of serious violence. Hon. Members will also be aware of the ongoing Operation Sceptre events that take place across all forces at particular times of the year and have so much impact.

There has rightly been a focus on early intervention, so I will run through just some of the successes and mention the range of young people we are reaching through our efforts. The #knifefree media advertising has reached around 6 million young people each time we have refreshed it, and there have been millions of views of the campaign videos. In the latest iteration, about half a million people have visited the knifefree.co.uk website since 8 April. I encourage hon. Members to spread the word about #knifefree and the website.

Our £22 million early intervention youth fund is already supporting 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners across England and Wales. At least 60,000 children and young people will be reached by this fund by the end of March 2020. Through our anti-knife crime community fund, we have supported 68 local grassroots community projects across England and Wales, reaching at least 50,000 young people in 2018-19. We are also supporting targeted interventions for intensive one-to-one support for people already involved in serious violence or county lines-related exploitation, through the St Giles Trust, Redthread and our young people’s advocates. We have already supported more than 800 young people in 2018-19 through these specific and targeted interventions, and that support continues. I have not even mentioned the £920 million troubled families programme, or the many various Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport schemes, including the Premier League Kicks programme, the success of which has been described by my hon. Friends and Members for Moray and for Solihull.

I will finish this part of my speech by saying an enormous thank you to everyone who works with young people to help tackle and prevent serious violence.

I will now quickly run through the medium and long-term measures we are taking. In the medium term, £35 million of the £100 million announced in the spring statement will be used to help establish violence reduction units in the seven forces that account for more than half of knife crime across the country. Officials are working with the people who will be involved in those discussions, and we will share those proposals as soon as we can next month. However, real progress will require a step change in the way in which all public authorities work together, which is why a multi-agency approach is fundamental to supporting the battle against violent crime.

The Prime Minister’s summit, to which we invited young people, bereaved families of victims, professionals, academics, faith leaders and businesses—pretty much anyone we could think of whom we could include in our efforts—has already made an impact, and will have a real effect from the centre of Government. It is essential that the Prime Minister is showing such leadership on the issue because all these efforts are being co-ordinated across all areas of Government.

At a local level, this is about partners working together, which is why we are consulting on a new legal duty to underpin a multi-agency approach. The consultation closes on 28 May, so I urge anyone who is interested to respond to it. We have also announced an independent review of drugs. There was surprisingly little discussion about the drugs market in this debate, but we know that it is one of the major drivers of serious violence, which is why the Home Secretary has commissioned Professor Dame Carol Black to conduct a review of drug use in the 21st century.

Jeff Smith: On the subject of drugs, may I just make a suggestion? If we were to legalise and regulate the cannabis trade, we could raise £1 billion a year to put into policing crime. We could also make the product safer and take the trade out of the hands of organised criminal gangs. By regulating our cannabis trade in the way we do with alcohol, we would make our streets safer.

Victoria Atkins: As the hon. Gentleman knows, regulation and decriminalisation are not in the review.

In the long term, it is only by offering stability and opportunity in young people’s lives that we can hope to tackle serious violence. Last year, the Home Secretary announced the 10-year, £200 million youth endowment fund. The fund is to be locked in for the next 10 years and invested to leverage up that investment. It is going to fund interventions and projects, evaluate what works, and act as a centre of expertise.

In conclusion—

Joan Ryan: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I must continue because I am conscious of the courtesies to the House, unless you are happy for me to give way, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are, so I will.

Joan Ryan: First, I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet Yvonne Lawson of the Godwin Lawson Foundation from my constituency, who lost her young teenage son to knife crime two years ago.

Nearly all hon. Members have talked about partnership working and great little projects on the ground, but all of us have also said that local authorities, which are the drivers at local level, are absolutely struggling because of the lack of resources. Does the Minister accept that local authorities’ ability to push forward partnership working is severely handicapped by the continuing lack of resources and ongoing cuts?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady. Lady, I am always very happy, of course, to meet those who have lost loved ones, as her constituents have, particularly those who are extraordinary in being able to found charities to help tackle serious violence.

The point of the violence reduction units is that they are bringing all the partner agencies together. As I say, we are investing £35 million from the £100 million available. I should add that that £35 million will be invested in VRUs and police forces that are most affected by violent crime—between 10 and 20 forces nationally. The details are being finalised. This partnership working will enable local authorities to play their part, in addition to the increased funding they are getting, as announced by my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
Criminals are buying children’s lives, and their misery, for the cheapest of prices. It is sometimes a new pair of trainers or a few pounds a week—and of course that is before the drug debts are called in. We have to offer them more. That is why, following the Prime Minister’s summit, I will be working with businesses to create opportunities for young people to provide them with a route away from violent crime.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford set out, no young person should grow up without hope, prospects or opportunities. There is an alternative to a life of violence. If we work together, we can offer young people a chance to make something more of their lives and stop the senseless killing. We can—and, if we all work together, we will—offer them a dream of a future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the matter of serious violence.

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 9 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS)

That the Customs (Records) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 113), dated 29 January 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (VALUE ADDED TAX)

That the Value Added Tax (Place of Supply of Services) (Supplies of Electronic Communications and Broadcasting Services) (Amendment and Revocation) (EU Exit) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 404), dated 28 February 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

That the Finance Act 2011, Schedule 23 (Data-gathering Powers) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 397), dated 28 February 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION

That the draft Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2012 (Amendment) Instrument 2019, which was laid before this House on 28 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PUBLIC PASSENGER TRANSPORT)

That the draft International Road Passenger Transport (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Alexandra Hospital, Redditch

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

6.49 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am glad to be able to raise in the Chamber the issue of services at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch. I hear concerns time and again in public meetings, and I thank the local groups, such as Save the Alex, that are campaigning on this matter.

In short, services at the Alex are inadequate. That is not my word, but the one used by the independent Care Quality Commission. It inspected Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which includes the Alex Hospital in Redditch, in June last year and again found it to be inadequate. That represents no change since the last inspection. Indeed, in 16 areas that the CQC inspects, only one was rated good, none was outstanding, and half were rated inadequate, with the remaining requiring improvement. That is not good enough.

On being elected in 2017, I inherited a situation where the trust had already approved a new clinical model for future acute services to which centralisation was key. As a result, regrettably, a number of services, including maternity and paediatric care, were removed from the Alex and relocated to Worcestershire Royal Hospital. Our maternity unit closed in November 2015, and paediatrics was “temporarily” transferred in September 2016. The new plan, which was rubber-stamped in 2017, is intended to relieve pressure on both hospitals, improve patient safety and address staff shortages, but almost two years on from the removal of services and the approval of the new plan, it is clear to me that it has not had the intended outcome. The hospital is still inadequate, and the trust remains in special measures. Some services have got worse. Patients cannot access services when they need them, waiting times are poor and promised investments are not coming to fruition quickly enough.

Pressure has not been relieved. Patient safety is being called into question, and staff shortages persist at both sites.

Since my election, I have given NHS bosses and management time to demonstrate to me and my constituents that the new clinical model is beneficial. I have done my best to explain to constituents why services were transferred, and I have visited the hospital time and again—along with my fellow Worcestershire MPs, who are here tonight—to keep a close eye on developments.

We have thousands of dedicated and fantastic staff in our hospital. I have spoken to many of them, and my constituents report time and again that the care they receive is fantastic. I thank every single member of staff at the hospital for their work. However, I do not believe I can continue in good faith to defend the new clinical model. It is not delivering for the people of Redditch. I secured this debate to press my constituents’ concerns on the Minister and call for a fresh approach. All options must remain on the table.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I spoke to her beforehand and explained the situation of some of my hospital patients at home. I commend her efforts to retain services at the Alexandra Hospital. The recommendations of Redditch Borough Council health commission, which came out
firmly against the clinical commissioning group proposals, must be given weight. The proposals must not progress to any lessening of services in the Alexandra. My own Ulster hospital is seeing proposals to redirect stroke services to a hospital that is over an hour away in traffic, which will certainly mean that damage cannot be fixed within the window of opportunity for recovery. Does she agree that money saving cannot trump life saving in any trust area?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It sounds as though his experiences are very similar to ours in Worcestershire. I am sure he will continue to stand up for his constituents.

I have campaigned for improvements to local health services, and I welcome the investments coming on stream as a result. Upgrades in endoscopy, a new urgent care centre at the Alex and better infrastructure have all come on stream. A frailty unit has been transferred from Worcester, and a new ward has opened to improve the flow of patients in and out of A&E. Those are all making a difference.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I echo my hon. Friend’s sentiment about the hard work of the stalwart staff of the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. I can testify that, right now, my 11-year-old son is sitting in the A&E department having a sprained ankle attended to by nurses. I am sure he will be fine; he has obviously been hooning around when he should have been paying attention at school—I will talk to him when I get home.

One of the hospitals run by the trust that is not talked about much is Kidderminster treatment centre. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to think coherently about all the services across the three hospitals? If we bring more services back to Redditch, we can also bring more long-term treatment services back to Kidderminster Hospital and have a much better service for all our constituents in Worcestershire.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my Worcestershire colleague for his intervention. I think we are all on the same page. We all want to see better services across the whole of our county of Worcestershire.

Where I am going with this debate and the point I want to make is that the long-promised plan for the Alex to become a centre of excellence for planned surgery has not materialised, despite my pressing for it constantly and despite a £29.6 million funding pot. That funding is in the process of being delivered across the trust, and it was intended to help implement the new clinical model.

That is why I believe it is time to look again at where and how services are provided, and particularly to consider the return of a range of maternity and paediatric services to the Alex. We need to explore options for the local population to use services in Birmingham, which are more accessible than those in Worcester. We also need to continue investment in our communities and build a medical school in Worcester to create our own local NHS workforce, which would help to address the shortage of staff at the root.

The context has changed because the Prime Minister recently announced the Government’s intention to provide the NHS with an additional £20.5 billion by 2023-24—the largest, longest funding settlement in the history of the NHS. We hear that the four CCGs that cover our two counties could merge into one in the future. This is why I believe it is time to be honest with people and for bosses to say that plan A is not working.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is an excellent champion for her constituents on this and many other issues. On the funding point, does she agree with me that those of us in Worcestershire are arguing not for special treatment, but for fair treatment? Particularly when it comes to funding, because we all know we are relatively underfunded at CCG level and elsewhere, we just want our fair share, not special treatment. We would just like a fair share of the cash, please. We know it is coming, and we would like our share of it.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend echoes my point. I absolutely agree. We know the NHS is world class and we know that more funding is coming on stream; we are just arguing for it to be distributed for our constituents’ benefit.

We need to act soon. Redditch is home to 85,000 people; the population has grown from 78,000 in 2001, and almost 90,000 people are expected to live locally by 2030. In neighbouring South Worcestershire, tens of thousands of new homes are planned and the population is going to grow rapidly. Redditch is a new town, and it has always attracted young families to move there and build a better life, away from the back streets of Birmingham and from all over the country. We are proud of our local environment and of much else, but I want to be able to promote the holistic experience of living in Redditch, and to say that this is a great place for people to come to and live, work, set up a business and raise their family. For that, we need to have all the facilities that young families expect, including excellent healthcare services. This is part of our campaign to unlock Redditch. It needs to be the best place in the midlands, and we deserve nothing less.

We were told that the reason for centralising maternity services away from Redditch is that the size of the population is not large enough to sustain a full maternity service safely, but that does not make sense to me and my constituents. I accept that safety has to be paramount and I know that the Meadow birth centre in Worcester does a brilliant job, but the truth is that we have a high proportion of young families, which is increasing the demand for maternity and children’s services. What the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said is the same for us: it can take over an hour to reach Worcester from some areas of the town, particularly in traffic. There is no direct bus or train link from Redditch, so my constituents who need to use public transport must travel to the hospital via Birmingham or Bromsgrove.

When we look around the other areas of the west midlands conurbation, we can see that there are maternity units with populations much smaller than Redditch’s: for example, in Oswestry, which has a population of 16,000; Bridgnorth, with 12,000; Burton-on-Trent, with 75,000; Hereford, with 63,000; and even Ludlow, with 11,000. I am calling on the CCG and the trust to publish those comparator statistics and justify why those towns should have their own maternity unit, but Redditch should not. Most people would understand that a higher risk birth would require more specialist
services and that might not not be possible in Redditch, but the vast majority of births can be catered for safely in a midwife-led maternity unit.

The centralisation has piled pressure on to Worcester. It cannot withstand that pressure and we have all voiced concerns in this Chamber. I talked about the ambulance handover delays at the Worcestershire Royal just before Christmas—they are amongst the worst in the country, with ambulances waiting for over an hour. I am very grateful that the Secretary of State visited Worcestershire Acute. He saw for himself—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Rachel Maclean: As I was saying, the Secretary of State visited Worcestershire Acute and saw the size of the emergency department, which constrains patient flow. Despite the incredible efforts of the staff triage and consultants, and even with the welcome recent investments and improvements, it is difficult to see how those problems can be solved in the short term. Surely, the answer is to let Redditch take some of the strain, particularly with paediatrics.

I appreciate that changes such as this will take time and involve many layers of management, but it is my job to ensure that the people who are making these decisions take into account the experience of my constituents. We are lucky to live in a country with free healthcare, free at the point of use. Investment in health pays off multiple times in both financial and wellbeing terms. Other trusts in the country have managed to recover from poor performance, but we in Worcestershire seem to be struggling on with one of the worst trusts in the country, and it is my constituents who pay the price. I am extremely frustrated that we are no closer to the green shoots of improvement than when I was elected, and there has been a high turnover of people in senior positions, which does not help.

I think that a practical solution to relieve pressure on the overloaded site at Worcester is to provide more care for children and families at Redditch, so I would really like to hear from the Minister what other plans there are to turn this around. What evidence does she have that improvements will take place under the current structure? How long are we expected to wait? What options are there for working more closely with the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, for example—a high-performing trust, which is rated “good” by the Care Quality Commission, with much better transport and strong historical links to Redditch?

I thank the Minister for coming here to reply to the debate. I very much look forward to hearing her response.

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I really thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for the passionate, articulate pitch she made on behalf of her constituents and the health services that they deserve, because obviously we all deserve good-quality health services. As the Minister responsible, it is my job to give challenge to ensure that we are delivering the best services we can. Obviously, they are not always as good as we would like them to be, but I can reassure my hon. Friend of my determination to make sure that we continue with the constant campaign for improvements, and for the best possible services. All our constituents, as taxpayers, are paying for those services, and they all deserve an equivalent service.

I thank my other hon. Friends from Worcestershire—my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—for showing their support. The issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch raises are clearly of concern across the wider area. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) has also lobbied me about this, notwithstanding the wider interests that he has in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch raised several important points and areas of concern, which I will seek to address. She raised a number of points about maternity services. She is absolutely right that we must ensure that we have the safest possible environment in which people have their children. Obviously, having safer births is very much a national priority, so that issue is of particular concern to me. As my hon. Friend is aware, the decision to move maternity and children’s services from the Princess Alexandra Hospital to the Worcestershire Royal was implemented in 2017, and it was clearly controversial—many changes are, and this is no exception. That is why we need to continue to give appropriate scrutiny—my hon. Friend is absolutely right to do that—to ensure that we are serving all our constituents as well as we possibly can. She is also right to say that challenges remain. The trust continues to be scrutinised closely by the Care Quality Commission and in this House.

My hon. Friend asks how long we have to wait. Quite often, changes can be achieved very quickly. Sometimes, however, whether cultural or behavioural changes, they take much longer than any of us are happy with. I say to her that in my experience, constant scrutiny by the CQC does deliver results. I encourage her to continue her discussions with local interest groups and the CQC to ensure that all the constant scrutiny and challenge drives improvement. I do not know how many times I have said it in this place, but sunlight is the best disinfectant. Accountability will drive improvement and change.

All that said, we should recognise that there has been some important progress in the service at the trust. The CQC looked at the maternity in-patient survey for February 2017, which found that the Worcestershire Royal rated well against other maternity services in all aspects of care and scored among the best in the country in partner engagement and involvement in the appropriate length of stay in hospital. In addition, following the reconfiguration of services the neonatal rata is now fully staffed and recruitment is going in the right direction; the maternity doctors’ rata is fully staffed; and the trust has avoided a lot of the cancellation of antenatal or gynaecology clinics that was previously seen. I know that people will be concerned because of the historical record, but the scrutiny of the CQC shows that there are improvements.

According to the most recent CQC report, maternity and gynaecology services at the Alex are rated “good” for caring and “responsive” and “requires improvement”
for other domains. Worcestershire Royal is rated “requires improvement” for safety and “good” in all other categories. The CQC recognised that the Worcestershire Royal’s maternity services, particularly for perinatal services, were not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement. Not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement.

In October 2018, the trust’s professional development team won the workforce team of the year award at the prestigious Nursing Times awards, which celebrate excellence in supporting the nursing and midwifery workforce. We congratulate them on that award. We should not be complacent, however. There is still very much more to do. I look forward to further discussions with my hon. Friend in the light of further investigations. We will do our best to support the entire community by making sure that performance is improved.

My hon. Friend raised the wider challenges facing the trust. It has been in special measures since December 2015. The latest CQC inspection judged the hospital as inadequate, with key concerns in urgent and emergency care, surgery and outpatients. I say again that scrutiny is not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement. Not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement.

I assure my hon. Friend that both the Government and national NHS bodies are committed to providing both the support and investment needed to help the trust make progress. I will be ensuring that we use our levers at a national level to give that appropriate challenge and support. Support currently in place for the trust includes a support package focusing on culture, risk and governance. That is very important. We always find, when a trust is going through the journey from requiring improvement to good, that leadership is crucial. I cannot overstate the importance of making sure that we are getting the right leaders in and mentoring them to deliver that. That support is crucial.

There is a quality improvement director, and there is a nurse retention collaborative programme to reduce turnover. There is a suggestion that that is starting to bear fruit. There will be emergency care support from the emergency care intensive support team and a peer support buddy arrangement with the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust. We have seen such buddy arrangements achieve real change, more than anything else by giving local leaders the confidence to be innovative and imaginative and really give additional challenge.

Local commissioners are closely involved in working with the trust to ensure that the quality of children’s and maternity services improves. Given the concerns my hon. Friend has expressed, I encourage her to engage with local commissioners to discuss how they are interpreting reviews of monthly divisional data and what they are doing to assure themselves of the quality of service. As a Minister, I can stand at the Dispatch Box and make promises, but ultimately I rely on local commissioners to do their bit to give challenge too. In giving me challenge, I encourage her also to give them challenge and have those discussions. The spirit of co-operation across the whole system is there to achieve improvements.

My hon. Friend rightly made her pitch for her constituents’ share of the increased funding for the NHS. While improvement is about more than just money, investment is clearly part of the picture. We will make the appropriate investments to support the trust. Recent examples of investments we have made are an award of £3.96 million for a breast imaging improvement plan, which will improve breast screening at the Alex; the development of a maternity hub to serve the Redditch area; and £3 million for a link bridge between the main hospital building and an outer building to be in place for the winter to assist with winter pressures.

I am confident that this will not be the last discussion my hon. Friend and I have about her local health services. I am grateful to her for bringing her concerns to me and putting them on the record. As I say, sunlight is the best disinfectant when it comes to inspection and challenge on the ground, but the opportunity to raise things here on the Floor of the House gives a signal to the entire health system that where we think things are not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for her comments and share her view that sunlight is a great disinfectant. May I press her? We have been undergoing this journey for four years, which is a long time. I had not been a Member of Parliament before and have never seen a trust turn around, so I would be grateful for some indication of how long she thinks it is reasonable for us to wait, with me as the local MP explaining to people, “You have to keep waiting.” Has she any examples of how it can happen and at what pace?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will answer my hon. Friend’s question, but I will answer a different one too. She asks how long it is reasonable to wait. It is not reasonable to have to wait at all, because we should be delivering services of an appropriate quality. How long will people have to wait? We should be entirely honest when an institution requires improvement. She is right that four years seems like a long time. When my local trust went into special measures, it came out within two years, and the crucial ingredient was getting the right leader in at the top. Other trusts wait longer because other challenges can come into play that mean they are judged to require improvement—some trusts still struggle to get the right personnel, for example. We need to look in detail at exactly where the weaknesses are. My challenge to the system is to come up with a good plan to help get out of it. I would expect the buddy system with the Wolverhampton trust to start to deliver that more effectively, because there is no better driver of speed than external challenge.

With that in mind, I would like to close this excellent debate. The points made here should be considered very seriously by the local health system.
 Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS)

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 855), dated 10 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 April, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 184.

Division No. 416]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
 ATKins, Victoria
 Austin, Ian
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Chris Leslie)
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Braverman, Suella
 Breerston, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenhshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Mr Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Caams, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverley, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coffey, David
 Collins, Damian
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Creasy, Stella
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip
 Davion, Sir Mr Michael
 Dara, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Dunne, rh Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallion, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gapes, Mike
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghanzi, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hermon, Lady
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jerneck, Robin
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moore, Damien
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O’Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pauwsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philip, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Priisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joanne
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Alok
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Rosyton
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Ian
 Stewart, rh Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swinson, Jo
Deferred Division

15 MAY 2019

Deferred Division

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Armesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Bets, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Barnbos
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Creagh, Mary
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic

Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John

David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Picio, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsal, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet

Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heppburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan
Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gedd
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laverty, Ian
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian
C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Graeme
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi

Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pldco, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast
by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Stevens, Jo
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the EU withdrawal agreement and political declaration.

Mr Sweeney: Einstein is widely credited with saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing multiple times but expecting different results. If the Government intend to bring their withdrawal agreement Bill to Parliament in the form of a Bill, is it not the case that it is only likely to receive any sort of majority in this House on condition of an amendment in support of a public vote? Does the Secretary of State accept that that will clearly show what the people think in this country? We will need to look at the policies of the party that finishes up with the most votes. Does he agree that that will clearly show what the people want?

Stephen Barclay: As the hon. Gentleman should know, part of the reason we have been having discussions with his Front-Bench colleagues is to look at how the legislation might evolve to take on board the earlier votes by the House. One could make a similar accusation against the Labour party. If we look at its policy on a second referendum, we see people such as Len McCluskey saying that it “risks tearing our society further apart, as the ignored majority believe their views have been scorned”.

while other Labour members say it is the way forward. There is no consistency among Labour Members, and that is part of their problem.

Vicky Foxcroft: When I met the Prime Minister in March, I put it to her that a public vote is the only way to get us out of the current deadlock. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Stephen Barclay: It is not only that I do not agree; the hon. Lady’s own Front-Bench colleagues do not agree. She says that a public vote is the only way, but that is not the current policy of her party. Her party’s policy is to say that if its deal were accepted, it would not put it to a public vote. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady asks what I think, but I answered that at the start of my response. I do not agree that a public vote is the way forward; the vote is for Members of this House, who cannot make a decision. The point is that I am not the only one who thinks that a public vote is not the way forward; the hon. Lady’s Front-Bench colleagues think so too, because it is not their current policy.

Jeff Smith: What about a vote on the Prime Minister’s deal? In a few weeks’ time, the Prime Minister will have asked MPs no fewer than four times whether we agree with her deal. Does the Secretary of State not think it would be fair to ask the public once whether they agree with the deal?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the hon. Gentleman will need to look at the Bill when it comes forward. What we voted for on previous occasions was a meaningful vote. We have been in discussions with Opposition parties and, as referenced in an earlier question, Members across the House, to take on board some of the concerns raised in those debates, and those will be reflected in the legislation brought to the House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Secretary of State could point out that the Opposition’s wish will be granted when the European elections take place next Thursday. That will be a genuine vote on what people think in this country. We will need to look at the policies of the party that finishes up with the most votes. Does he agree that that will clearly show what the people want?

Stephen Barclay: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree with me that we have had a people’s vote. It was won in 2016 and that was reflected in the Labour party’s manifesto. Once again, we hear Labour Members saying one thing to the electorate when they face an election but doing another when they come to the House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Merit implies virtue, and while there might be some expediency in it, there are certainly no virtues, are there?

Stephen Barclay: I do not think that any Member of this House thinks that my right hon. Friend is anything other than virtuous in all that he does. In our commitment to bring forward the withdrawal agreement Bill, we have listened to the concerns of Members across the House and have reflected that in the draft legislation that is being prepared. It will be for Members to reach a decision on that or one of the two other alternatives—either
We risk not leaving at all, which I think would be a huge betrayal of the 17.4 million people who voted to leave, or we leave with no deal, which would create issues for the Union and the economic disruption that would flow.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Many of my constituents tell me that they would not vote in a second referendum because they are angry and frustrated that Parliament has not delivered on the first one. Does the Secretary of State agree that a second referendum would continue the divisiveness and uncertainty, and would almost certainly not settle the issue, because the turnout would be smaller?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend on that. I would urge his constituents to vote, and to vote Conservative, in that election, but he is right to say that any such second referendum would be both divisive and not necessarily decisive. They have perhaps taken their lead from many Members of the House, who seem unwilling to confront the real choice that lies before them and vote, which is why they are seeking to have a second referendum.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government’s position is that it is democratic to come back to the House of Commons for the fourth time to try to persuade us to change our minds. They are entitled to try, although it may be unwise. Can the Secretary of State explain to the House, therefore, why it is undemocratic to ask the British people, given what we now know, whether they wish to change their minds or not?

Stephen Barclay: Because we had a decision; we gave the British public that and we have not delivered on it. I would have much more time for the right hon. Gentleman’s position if behind the language of a confirmatory vote he wanted to explore the different ways of leaving: if he was saying, “The public gave a clear instruction to leave, but we want to have a vote between leaving with the Prime Minister’s deal or leaving with no deal.” But his position is to revoke. He does not want to say that he supports revoking, so he wants to hide behind this veneer, façade and impression whereby this can be can done through a second referendum. I urge him to have some candour and say he wants to revoke. Come out and say it. That seems to be the right hon. Gentleman’s position and that is what he should say.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I want to revoke article 50 and so do the vast majority of my constituents. Does the Secretary of State not see the glaring failure of logic in giving this House four votes but not being prepared to give the population a second vote? That is why people who do want to remain in the EU will be voting for the Scottish National party in the forthcoming European elections in Scotland.

Stephen Barclay: Well now, what is always glaring from SNP Members is their desire to overturn democratic decisions. They did this on the referendum in 2014 and they want to do it on the referendum in 2016. They then want to say to this House that a further referendum is one they will abide by, but we know that if they get the wrong result, it will be three strikes and yet again they will say that they are still not out.

2. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I continue to have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues across government. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have pledged to commit the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of this Parliament.

Mark Menzies: Export sales of organic produce totalled £188 million in 2016, supporting countless British jobs, particularly in the agricultural sector. What assurances can the Secretary of State give me on the certification that protects that organic produce in respect of exports to the EU after we leave?

Stephen Barclay: I know my hon. Friend’s constituency very well, as it is where I was born and grew up. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of this issue in the farming sector. I am happy to give him the commitment that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking at this issue. My hon. Friend will be aware that this is part of a wider approach, where we can take a much more bespoke approach to our farming needs once we are out of the EU, rather than the catch-all, one-size-fits-all approach in which the common agricultural policy applies.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that food processing is very much related to farming, and it is our biggest manufacturing sector. Has he talked to that sector? Does he not realise that research by King’s College London shows that every leave constituency of this country will be 20% worse off leaving the EU—on any terms?

Stephen Barclay: First, may I join the Prime Minister in recognising the hon. Gentleman’s service? He said at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday that he was a Euro sceptic when he came into the House; there is still time for him to return to his true beliefs.

As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, I represent one of the key farming constituencies in the country, in the fens. He will also be aware that the majority of farmers voted to leave because they see the opportunities—for example, in respect of things like the three-crop rule, which is restrictive for many in the farming community. Through the Agriculture Bill, we can have a much more bespoke approach. The key issue is to speak to those who actually farm. The overriding message from the National Farmers Union is to back the deal, and farmers themselves want the liberty of being outside the straitjacket of the EU. That is what this Government will deliver.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure livestock farmers in Brecon and Radnorshire and throughout the country that immediate funding for them will be guaranteed in all circumstances?
Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend has championed the livestock sector extremely assiduously, and I know he has met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss these issues. We have given a commitment to match funding, but we must ensure that we do so in a more bespoke way. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further so that we can give his constituents the support that they need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline the support for agrifood producers, with reference to the food labelling and stamps issue, which is still uncertain and has the potential to cause massive financial strain and supply issues?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight an under-discussed area of policy. Some Members want only to talk down the opportunities of Brexit, rather than to talk about what we can do with the freedoms that Brexit unlocks. One of those freedoms is in respect of food labelling, which is an area in which the United Kingdom can apply a more bespoke approach and in which there will be opportunities. Indeed, last week I was in Scotland with manufacturers and we discussed just such issues.

UK Economy

3. Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect on the UK economy of the UK leaving the EU.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight an under-discussed area of policy. Some Members want only to talk down the opportunities of Brexit, rather than to talk about what we can do with the freedoms that Brexit unlocks. One of those freedoms is in respect of food labelling, which is an area in which the United Kingdom can apply a more bespoke approach and in which there will be opportunities. Indeed, last week I was in Scotland with manufacturers and we discussed just such issues.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The withdrawal agreement is not the end state of the relationship between the UK and the EU; it is merely a mechanism to get to that end state. In a free trade agreement, which I hope we get, our financial services will absolutely be able to have more freedom. They have a brighter future outside the EU than within it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The creative industries tell me that their economy is already suffering, with the concerns of musicians in particular, for example, not being addressed in any part of the Government’s negotiations or deal. They will have to move kit and people around the European Union, and they are already losing out on bookings. What discussions is the Minister having with representatives of, for instance, the Musicians Union about this problem?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave just a minute ago. The withdrawal agreement itself does not describe the end state of our relationship between the UK and the EU. It is simply a means to the end. We are discussing all the time with representatives of the creative industries, and we hope that, once the agreement is passed, we can then go on to the second phase of the discussions.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The European Union is mired in low economic growth. Many of its countries have eye-watering levels of youth unemployment and its currency has to be constantly supported by quantitative easing. Can my hon. Friend understand why anybody would want to chain us to this rotten corpse?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I fully appreciate the force of my hon. Friend’s argument. The idea that the EU simply represented the be-all and end-all of economic prosperity has been completely exploded by his remarks. If those record high levels of youth unemployment occurred in the constituencies of any Labour Member, they would be rightly outraged. We have great opportunities outside the EU, which is why I hope that we can pass the Bill and move forward in these discussions.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The car industry, British steel and the travel industry are all citing Brexit as a major cause of concern in their sectors. Does the Minister consider that to be project fear or project reality?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I urge the right hon. Gentleman to end the uncertainty and back the Bill so that we can move on with this debate and get to the next phase of the negotiations. That would provide the certainty that the industries that he cites are looking for.
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister reminded us that the Government have done an economic analysis of a number of Brexit scenarios, but, very pointedly, they have not given us an analysis of the impact of the scenario that they are going to ask us to vote on in a few weeks’ time. Every analysis they have done of every Brexit scenario has shown that the economic damage to Scotland caused by Brexit is always made even worse if we also lose our rights under free movement of people. How does the Minister justify imposing this additional economic damage on a country that rejected Brexit by 62% in 2016?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I fully appreciate the concern of the Members from the Scottish National party. They campaigned for two referendums. They got beaten in both of them and now they simply want to re-run them. The fact is that the United Kingdom voted to leave and this Government—and Ministers—are pledged to deliver on that referendum result.

Peter Grant: I want the result of the referendum to be respected. I want the 62% of sovereign citizens in my nation to have their declared will respected. Does the Minister not realise that, every time he or his colleagues say that Scotland has to put up with this because Scotland is part of the Union, they are driving another nail into the coffin of that Union? Does he not appreciate that his comments today will simply persuade more and more Scots that, next week, the way to protect Scotland’s interests is by returning an increased number of SNP candidates to the European Parliament and by making sure that, in 2024, Scotland participates in those European elections as a full sovereign member of a partnership of equals?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was in Scotland last week, and the opinion there is very divided on this issue, as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate, as a democrat, that the vote in 2016 was a national vote—a United Kingdom vote—and we are pledged to respect the majority result, which was to leave the European Union.

Customs Union

4. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the economic effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Any assessment will depend on the counterfactuals that it is measured against, and those were considered in the economic analysis that was put out in November.

Gill Furniss: Many of my constituents in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough contact me regularly with their wide-ranging views on Brexit. Will the Secretary of State reassure them that they would be no worse off if we left without a customs union and without the elusive trade deal that the Secretary of State for International Trade has failed to deliver despite stating that it would be the easiest thing in human history to negotiate?

Stephen Barclay: There is nothing elusive about the text of the political declaration, which makes it clear that the Government can negotiate the benefits of a customs arrangement alongside an independent trade policy. The economic analysis shows that that is the best way forward of the options open to the Government.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On Monday, the Secretary of State’s two predecessors, 11 other former Cabinet Ministers and the Chair of the 1922 Committee wrote to the Prime Minister urging her “to reject a customs union solution with Labour”.

Many Cabinet Ministers clearly agree with them. Does the Secretary of State?

Stephen Barclay: I have been clear throughout that we have an approach that I think is the best way forward. There are conflicting views in all the parties including, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, on his own Front Bench. We are discussing these issues with the Labour party to seek a way forward on behalf of the House that will allow us to deliver on the referendum result. If he is asking about my personal position, I have always been clear that we made a clear manifesto commitment with regards to the single market and customs union, and we are trying to look at how to deliver on the referendum result. As the shadow Secretary of State would say, those discussions are ongoing.

Paul Blomfield: I guess that might have come close to a suggestion that the Secretary of State does agree with those who are opposing the Prime Minister’s position. But this is, after all, a Secretary of State who voted with those two predecessors against his own Government’s proposal on extending article 50, even after he had recommended it to the House, so I think we deserve some clarity on these issues. The authors of Monday’s letter also said of any agreement that is reached:

“No leader can bind his or her successor...so the deal would likely be...at best temporary...at worse illusory.”

Does he agree with that?

Stephen Barclay: It is not a revelation to this House that I supported leaving in the referendum, that I still support leaving, that I have voted consistently on every occasion to leave, that I have voted against extending article 50 and that I have stood by the manifesto on which I was elected. The question for Labour Members is why they repeatedly—at every opportunity—refuse to stand by their manifesto commitment. Why will they not honour their promises to the electorate? Yes, I do support leaving, I support leaving with a deal, and I have made it clear that if we do not leave with a deal, of the two alternative options I would leave with no deal. My position has been consistent. Why hasn’t theirs?

EU Settlement Scheme

6. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the effectiveness of the EU settlement scheme for European economic area nationals.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This is a hugely important scheme designed to help EEA and EU citizens
take up their rights and deliver on the Government’s commitment that we want them to stay. I regularly meet colleagues in the Home Office to discuss the scheme, and it is important to note that the Home Office has received more than 650,000 applications so far, with thousands more being received every week. Applications are free and there is plenty of time to apply.

Daniel Zeichner: If the Government really wanted to make non-UK EU nationals feel welcome and wanted them to stay, they would make this an easy system. In fact, people have to have the right phone. If they do not have the right phone, they have to go to an ID scanning centre. But just look at where those centres have been placed; they are all around London, so the Secretary of State’s constituents and my constituents have to travel all the way to Bedford, Peterborough or London. Why is there not at least an ID scanning centre in every county?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the accessibility of the scheme, and I agree that it should be accessible. There are going to be 200 assisted digital locations across the UK to support people to register, including one in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency of Cambridge, which he should welcome.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is all well and good for the Minister to say that there are going to be these centres, but they are not here yet. My constituents are having to travel to Glasgow for ID scanning because there is not an opportunity to do that in Aberdeen, where there is only a small library centre. I am incredibly concerned—that this issue has been highlighted to me—that women fleeing domestic violence are being told that, because their application is a bit more difficult, they will have to go all the way to Glasgow, when they are already suffering from destitution as a result of domestic violence.

Mr Walker: I take on board the hon. Lady’s point. In Aberdeen, and the scanning centres that she mentioned, it is also possible for people to apply via the Android app. My colleagues at the Home Office have also been in regular talks with Apple to ensure that applications can also be made through its devices. There is a whole range of ways in which people can apply. Face-to-face support at home is also available to help particularly vulnerable people complete their applications.

Sovereignty

8. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the potential level of sovereignty that the UK will have after leaving the EU. [910924]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I know that the hon. Gentleman has consistently championed leaving the EU on the grounds of sovereignty. The referendum was a call to reclaim the UK’s sovereignty by ensuring that the decisions that affect us are made by those whom we elect. On borders, free movement will end, with Parliament deciding our domestic immigration policy in the national interest. On money, vast annual payments to the EU will end, and the UK will leave the EU budget. On laws, EU law in the UK will end, as will the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union. All this can be achieved by voting for the withdrawal agreement.

Kelvin Hopkins: People voted in the referendum for the United Kingdom to be independent, democratic and self-governing, but the BBC recently broadcast a comment by the Belgian Liberal politician, Guy Verhofstadt, about the UK becoming a “colony” of the EU. What are the Government going to do to avoid such a humiliation?

Mr Walker: I think the hon. Gentleman will recognise that some of these statements may be made to provoke rather than necessarily to inform. We have a very clear agreement, in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, on the UK coming out of and separating itself from the European Union. That is something that Members across this House, bearing in mind the manifestos on which they were elected, should get on and support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The BBC documentary “Brexit: Behind Closed Doors” was a devastating expose of the incompetence of the Government’s Brexit negotiating strategy. It showed the contempt the EU has for the Prime Minister’s stance and showed that the EU has run rings round us at every opportunity. With two exit dates having come and gone, despite over 100 assurances from the Prime Minister on the Floor of the House, is it not clear that the simplest, cheapest, cleanest and most honest way to deliver Brexit is to leave with no deal on 31 October?

Mr Walker: If my hon. Friend had voted as the Secretary of State and I have voted, we would have left the EU already.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): A YouGov poll published today indicates that a majority of people are not happy with the European Union and feel that it may break up in the next 20 years. There is also widespread concern about the political elite both at European and national levels. Does this not show that at some time in the near future, Europe is going to go through major reform, and is it not better for us to be there and be part of that reform? Should we not therefore now be considering, in the light of the fact that there is no majority here for no deal or for a second referendum, revoking article 50?

Mr Walker: I admire the hon. Gentleman’s honesty in setting out that his position is clearly to revoke article 50. These are arguments that were made before the referendum. We had a negotiation with the European Union, and we put that approach to the people in the referendum and said that they should decide. I think we should listen to their decision and follow it through.

Political Declaration: Security

9. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether the Government have made a recent assessment of the adequacy of the security commitments provided for in the political declaration. [910925]
Stephen Barclay: If the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) gives me a moment, I will answer with some specific numbers on recruitment. As a former Health Minister whose portfolio covered the workforce, I have always taken an interest in this area, so if he gives me a moment to get past the first two words, I will try my best to respond. It is not a widely known fact that, since the referendum, there are 700 more doctors from the EU27 countries working in the NHS and over 5,200 more EU27 nationals working in NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups.

The hon. Lady is right that we need to do more on nurse recruitment. The Department is doing a huge number of things, including on the apprenticeship levy, looking at the skills mix and professional qualifications and investing up to £20.5 billion extra a year in the NHS, a lot of which is targeted at improvements to the workforce. She is right that we need to look at how to strengthen nurse recruitment, but it is misleading to keep presenting to the House the fiction that, since the referendum, there has been a fall in the number of EU staff working in the NHS, when 700 more doctors are working in it since then.

Liz McInnes: Some 64% of medical professionals think that the NHS will get worse after Brexit. They have not been fooled by a slogan on the side of a bus. Can the Secretary of State explain why the Government are struggling to convince those who work for the NHS that there will be a Brexit dividend?

Stephen Barclay: I suspect that this constant drumbeat of negativity around it does not help. The fact is that we have committed to a 10-year plan. The hon. Lady should listen to people like Simon Stevens, the former Labour adviser and the chief executive of NHS England. She should look at the areas of improvement to care and stop talking down our NHS. In terms of Brexit, there are things, if one looks at the October 2017 paper, to protect the NHS, but it is time to stop talking down the NHS and look at the funding commitment this Government have made.

Emma Dent Coad: I should declare an interest: I have several family members working in the NHS. As we have heard, there is huge concern about the lack of nurses—particularly specialist nurses—coming from the EU. The NHS used to have a recruitment programme in Portugal, where the training is excellent, particularly in intensive and post-operative care, and there is good care but not enough jobs. The NHS can no longer do that. In addition, medical research teams are in despair because they cannot exchange specialist researchers to further medical science. Can the Secretary of State reassure the medical profession that this is keeping him awake and that he has a response to it?

Stephen Barclay: It is quite remarkable that the hon. Lady makes no mention of the five new medical schools that this Government have committed to, of the record expansion in doctor training that this Government have committed to or of the lifting of tier 2 visas for not only doctors but nurses, so that we can recruit around the globe. The Opposition seem to think that recruitment into the NHS stops at Europe, but we recruit talent for
the NHS from around the globe, and we have lifted tier 2 visas to facilitate that. This constant drumbeat of negativity from the hon. Lady does not reflect the reality of this Government’s commitment to our NHS.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I declare an interest: many members of my family work in the NHS. The NHS depends on tax and national insurance revenues. What is the Government’s assessment of the impact of leaving the European Union on those tax and national insurance revenues?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need a strong economy to have a strong NHS. The option set out in the economic analysis that was published by the Treasury in November makes it clear that the Prime Minister’s plan is the one that will deliver the strongest economy and enable us to make that record, 10-year commitment of up to £20.5 billion more a year to our NHS. That is a sign of the Conservative party’s commitment to the NHS, and for the majority of years that the NHS has existed, it has been run by a Conservative Government.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) will take it in the right spirit if I say that it was most solicitous and courteous of her to notify us that her family members work in the national health service, but for the avoidance of doubt, it is not necessary to declare an interest simply because one visits a doctor from time to time.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I was going to say that both my parents were nurses, as was the shadow Secretary of State’s mum, but I obviously do not need to. I remember being accused of negativity, as the Secretary of State has done repeatedly today, when we warned of the dangers of privatising the probation service, and look how that worked out. It is not our job to challenge the Government. They might not like it, but that is one reason we are here. Public health is potentially at risk from Brexit. Chlorinated chicken is a public health risk.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): No it is not.

Jenny Chapman: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seems to think it is.

Michael Fabricant: Well it isn’t.

Jenny Chapman: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman take that up with the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). How can we trust this Government to protect our public health or our NHS in any trade deal with the United States when they cannot agree within Cabinet? The Environment Secretary says that chlorinated chicken will be banned, but the Secretary of State for International Trade says it will not be. Who speaks for the Government on that issue?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is right that it is her job to challenge the Government, and unfortunately for Government Members she usually does that more effectively than we would like her to. On this issue, however, I disagree with her. Labour policy is that it wants a say on EU trade policy, even though EU treaties do not allow that. For many years, Conservative Members have been told by the Labour party that we cannot go into things such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership because that will be a threat to our NHS—that is what Labour Members have said repeatedly. Now they say that they want to pass control of our independent trade policy to the EU, but that that will not be a threat to the NHS. Once again, Labour Members say one thing when it suits them, and another thing today. There is no consistency in their trade policy.

Support for Towns

13. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support towns after the UK leaves the EU.[910932]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Department continues to work closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that towns and communities across England are supported post Brexit. In March, the Government announced a new £1.6 billion stronger towns fund for England, which will boost growth and give communities a stronger say in their future after Brexit.

Mary Robinson: Earlier this year, the Government announced that £55.6 million will be made available to local government to cover the additional expenditure resulting from Brexit, and it is important that councils such as Stockport are prepared from day one after we leave the EU, so that my constituents can have uninterrupted local services. How will my hon. Friend ensure that, as local authorities make their bids for the stronger towns fund, towns and villages such as Cheadle are able to feel the benefit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her tireless work representing and championing her constituents in the north-west. More than half the allocated stronger towns fund will go to towns across the north of England, and just over £281 million will be allocated to the north-west region. There will be further opportunity to deliver locally led projects, create new jobs and support the Government’s commitment to building a more prosperous economy across the United Kingdom.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One of the ways that the Government could start moving on regeneration, not just in England but across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, is to set out when the consultation on the shared prosperity fund will start. It was meant to start before December 2018, but Ministers from the Treasury, the Wales Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy do not know when it will be. Perhaps Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union can give us some answers for a change.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will have observed that we have not yet reached a deal on the withdrawal agreement. The shared prosperity fund is the pot of money that will be allocated across the UK once we have left the EU. The withdrawal agreement still has to go through. We recognise the importance of reassuring
local areas at that point that the shared prosperity fund will be distributed, but it does not make any sense to do that ahead of the ratification of the deal.

Revoking Article 50: Voter Confidence

14. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on voter confidence in (a) politicians and (b) democracy of revoking Article 50. [910933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Revoking article 50 would cause irreparable damage to the relationship between voters and the Members of Parliament who represent them. It would reverse the outcome of the 2016 referendum, betraying not only the 17.4 million voters who voted to leave but everyone who voted, putting their faith in our democracy at risk. Revoking article 50 would break the trust the British people place in politicians, in voting and in democracy.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. What steps is his Department taking to maintain the public’s faith in the importance of their votes and confidence in this Government delivering what they said they would deliver, particularly as we head into European elections that the public did not want, vote for or support?

James Cleverly: Ultimately, there are only three ways that this situation can resolve itself: the UK leaves the EU with an agreement; the UK leaves without an agreement; or we revoke article 50 and do not leave. Leaving without a deal is undesirable, but not leaving is unacceptable. That is why the Government maintain the position that they want to leave the European Union with an agreement as quickly as possible, restoring people’s faith in the democratic process and honouring the commitment we made in the 2016 referendum.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Next month, it will be three years since the referendum. Does the Minister regard the referendum choice as binding for all time? Does he not recognise that at some point it will be necessary to go back to the people and ask whether they still think leaving the EU is a good idea?

James Cleverly: The Government’s position is that the referendum result is binding until it is delivered.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will not the biggest danger to confidence in democracy come when the promised sunlit uplands fail to materialise? Is not the only way out of this mess to go back to the people and ask them to exercise their democratic choice?

James Cleverly: The British people have already exercised their democratic choice. I do not subscribe to the negative predictions that the hon. Gentleman and others have made about a post-Brexit British future. More importantly, international businesses do not agree with him; inward investment into the UK is still flourishing. The employment market does not agree with his predictions either, because unemployment is still reducing and employment is still increasing. I am confident—the Government are confident—that there is a bright future ahead for this country outside the European Union. That is what we are committed to delivering and that is what we are working towards.

Security

15. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the merits of continued co-operation with the EU on security after the UK leaves the EU; and if he will make a statement. [910934]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Last week, I was in Sibiu, where I made clear that we face common and evolving threats to European security. Those threats demand close co-operation and the UK has a leading role to play in that.

Michael Fabricant: My right hon. Friend will know that the Bundesnachrichtendienst has already made it absolutely clear that the United Kingdom is one of the biggest intelligence services in the world and a member of Five Eyes and that Europe is dependent on the United Kingdom for intelligence. We also wish to co-operate with them. Does that not make complete nonsense of what some Opposition Members say—that if we left the EU, without a deal or otherwise, the EU would not continue to co-operate with us for its own benefit?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a shared interest between the UK and the European Union in close collaboration on security. He is right that the UK is the only European member of the Five Eyes intelligence network and that we are the only EU country that contributes both the NATO 2% and the overseas aid 0.7% commitments. It is in both sides’ interests to work closely on our shared challenges, because many of those challenges lie beyond Europe.

No-deal Expenditure

17. Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): How much Government Departments have spent on preparations for leaving the EU without a deal. [910937]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Additional EU exit funding allocated by Her Majesty’s Treasury to Departments and devolved Administrations covers all scenarios. No-deal spending cannot readily be separated from deal spending, given the significant overlap in plans in many cases. Since 2016, the Treasury has allocated more than £2.4 billion of funding for all exit scenarios.¹

Mr McFadden: Despite talking up and legitimising a no-deal outcome for two years, the Prime Minister applied for two different extensions to the article 50 period to avoid that outcome, because she knows it would be damaging to the country. The Minister talks of £2.4 billion. Would that money not have been better spent on the fight against knife crime, on helping families struggling to cope with universal credit or on 100 other causes that would benefit our constituents, rather than on an argument that, by the Prime Minister’s actions, she has shown she does not even believe in?

James Cleverly: Her Majesty’s Government have never had the policy to take no deal off the table; the House has committed the Government through votes to do so. The right hon. Gentleman talks about spending in other Departments. We have, for example, seen record spending in the national health service, making good on the Government’s commitment. If he does not want to see any more money spent on no-deal preparations, it is incumbent on him to bring this to a conclusion, and the best way of doing so is by voting for the withdrawal agreement Bill when it is presented to the House, giving this country certainty and the ability to move forward in a post-Brexit world.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In an op-ed in The Sun on Saturday, the Brexit Secretary argued that “it would be inexcusable for the Government to not use the coming months to continue to prepare” for no deal. Indeed, based on his answers today, no doubt he would like to accelerate those preparations.

James Cleverly: The Treasury has already allocated money for no-deal preparation. We continue to prepare for no deal, because at the moment there is still the possibility that on 31 October the United Kingdom will leave with no deal. Members of the House who are uncomfortable with that position can take a no-deal Brexit off the table by voting for a withdrawal agreement and leaving with a deal, which remains the Government’s policy. If we were to do that, we could move on to the second stage of the negotiations and set about creating a strong working relationship with our European partners and other nations around the world.

Support for Fisheries

18. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What discussions he has had with Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for the fisheries sector after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on supporting our fishing industry. The Government’s vision for a sustainable and profitable fishing sector was set out in the fisheries White Paper in July 2018. As an independent coastal state, we will control access to UK waters and pursue a fairer share of fishing opportunities for the benefit of fishermen in Banff and Buchan and across the UK.

David Duguid: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. Will he confirm that, whatever form the withdrawal agreement takes, we will leave the common fisheries policy, as he just said, and take part in annual negotiations as an independent coastal state no later than December 2020?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is right. He continues to be a passionate and persistent champion of the fishing industry in his constituency. The best way to ensure our taking part in those negotiations by December 2020 is to vote for the withdrawal agreement, as he and I have done, to secure those rights, and not to try to trap us in the common fisheries policy as the SNP has done.

Legal Services

Bambos Charalambous: Legal services in the UK are a success story, with the sector making a significant contribution to the economy each year. The Law Society estimates it at about £25.7 billion, with £4.4 billion in net exports and 370,000 jobs. That relies in part on uniform market access across the EU and the European economic area. Will the Minister therefore work with representatives from the legal sector to ensure that it is maintained by the UK-EU future relationship?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman is a diligent member of the Justice Committee, and he is absolutely right about the importance of the UK legal services sector to exports and its contribution to the economy. We have listened to EU leaders, and we understand and respect the position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and there can be no cherry-picking. Although we are not seeking single market membership, we are seeking ambitious arrangements for services and investment that build on recent EU FTAs. We are working closely with colleagues from the Ministry of Justice and engaging with industry stakeholders, including the Law Society, to achieve a deal that works for the UK legal services sector in terms of both market access and civil judicial co-operation.

Topical Questions

T1. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Since our last questions session, over the past six weeks the Government and the Opposition have held constructive meetings. The Prime Minister met the Leader of the Opposition earlier this week, and discussions continue with the aim of reaching a compromise that could command a majority in the House. The Prime Minister has also said that the Government will introduce the withdrawal agreement Bill in the first week after the recess, which will allow more time for the talks to continue, but with a view to ratifying the withdrawal agreement before the summer recess.
Bambos Charalambous: Can the Secretary of State confirm that the withdrawal agreement Bill will include the Government’s proposal for legislation to enshrine the backstop in UK law?

Stephen Barclay: Yes, because the withdrawal agreement will need to be ratified, and ratification includes the Northern Ireland protocol.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I wonder if the excellent Secretary of State has had an opportunity to watch “Brexit: Behind Closed Doors”. The BBC has hidden it away on BBC Four, but it is quite a revealing programme. In it, the lead negotiator for our exit from the European Union, Olly Robbins—who I think is in Brussels this week—says that because he has done such a rotten deal he cannot come back to the United Kingdom and is applying for Belgian citizenship. Is that appropriate, Secretary of State?

Stephen Barclay: Without straying too much into my television viewing habits of recent weeks, I must confess to my hon. Friend that I am intending to watch that documentary. I have seen clips of it, including the one to which he has referred. As he will appreciate, given my current diary, I do not have a huge amount of television time, but I will be sure to make time to watch it in the coming days.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In February, the Secretary of State told the House: “the withdrawal agreement Bill is a significant piece of legislation and we will need to get it through the House, but the key issue is getting the deal through, because once we have done that, we will have the basis for the necessary consensus in the House to approach that legislation.”—[Official Report, 28 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 505.]

That makes sense—deal first, implement second—so will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Government are going to hold a fourth meaningful vote before the withdrawal agreement Bill is introduced, or whether the House will be asked to do the opposite of what he advocated in February and implement a deal that has not been approved?

Stephen Barclay: I do not want to stray into territory that is rightly much more a matter for the Chair, but I think I am correct in saying, Mr Speaker, that you have been very clear in your directions regarding meaningful votes and whether they would be considered. As for the deal, we have talked about whether an agreement could be reached with the Opposition. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, those talks are ongoing, including the discussion between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition this week. We have made it clear, and the Prime Minister has made it clear, that we will bring the withdrawal agreement legislation to the House in the week after the recess, and the House will have an opportunity to vote at that point.

Keir Starmer: I should have thought it was patently obvious that if the Prime Minister’s deal is put to the House for the fourth time—if that is allowed—it will fail, just as it has failed three times already.

Let me make it clear that Labour opposes the idea of passing the withdrawal agreement Bill without an agreed deal. That would put the cart before the horse, and Labour will therefore vote against the Bill’s Second Reading. How on earth does the Secretary of State think that a Bill to implement a deal that is not before the House can be passed in two weeks’ time—or is this about keeping the Prime Minister in office for another week and giving her a lifeline for today’s meeting of the 1922 Committee?

Stephen Barclay: The talks with the Opposition Front Bench team have been going on for over six weeks, and the House has now looked at the meaningful vote on three occasions and made its view clear. The question therefore arises, as came through in amendments from a number of Members of this House—such as the Snell-Nandy amendment—whether there are changes to the withdrawal agreement Bill that would enable it to command wider support. It is on that basis that not only have we had those discussions but indeed the right hon. and learned Gentleman has welcomed them. When the House sees that legislation, it will be for it to decide whether it commands a majority of the House. The right hon. and learned Gentleman’s personal position might be that what is in that text is irrelevant, because he personally wants to have a second referendum, but that is not the basis on which the discussions have been held: that may be his personal position, but it is not, as I understand it, the official position of the Leader of the Opposition. It will be for the House to make a decision, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that there will be an opportunity for it to do that in the week after the recess.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Secretary of State looks physically fit and is in good shape and I expect he goes to the gym a lot. If he decided to leave his gym and the gym said to him, “You’ve got to give us two years’ notice; when you leave, you have to pay four years’ worth of membership fees up front; and after you’ve left, we’re still going to control your fitness programme,” would he regard that as a good deal or a bad deal?

Stephen Barclay: I fear that we are straying slightly into territory that is not primarily relevant to the legislation we will be considering after the recess. My gym attendance is a bit like my television viewing: a little non-existent at present. The point is that we as a House know that we need to confront not just the issue of the legislation in the withdrawal agreement but the consequences that would flow from it. When I gave evidence to the Lords Select Committee yesterday, in the usual joyful comments to which my social media feeds are accustomed, people seemed surprised that if we do not leave the EU with a deal, the House will need to face a choice as to whether it then leaves without a deal or whether Members of this House, as they have done with no deal before, seek to prevent that and seek to revoke such an outcome. I do not think that that is a revelation, although it seemed to be greeted as one; I think it is simply a statement of fact and logic, and Members of the House need to confront that when they consider the withdrawal agreement Bill that comes before the House after the recess.
with Ministers, and time and again they have failed to provide the assurances needed; what has the Brexit Secretary got to say now?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised that question. I have not visited his constituency exactly, but I have been to Teesport and seen many representatives of the chemicals industry, and the one thing they are very anxious to do is create some certainty: they want this phase of the Brexit process to be completed and feel we should back the deal and back the withdrawal agreement. They have, unlike many Opposition Members, accepted the result of the referendum and want to move forward with this process.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What preparations have the Government made to establish a UK investment bank to take over the responsibilities and functions of the European Investment Bank and indeed to do more for investment in the infrastructure and businesses of the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): My hon. Friend raises an important point. As the Treasury has set out, there will be extra support for the British Business Bank to play a role in that regard. I would also point him towards the important role of the UK shared prosperity fund in replacing elements of structural funding.

T3. [910945] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State said earlier that a no-deal scenario would be harmful to the economy and threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom, but he then also said that he would support a no-deal scenario rather than remaining in the European Union. So is he saying that threatening the integrity of the Union of the United Kingdom is actually a price worth paying for a hard Tory Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: What I am saying is that there will be consequences to both options. Revoke would involve a betrayal of democracy, going back on the commitments that this House has given and having a divisive, but not decisive, second referendum that could end up with the same result as before. Businesses are experiencing uncertainty, including in Dundee, where I was on Thursday. It has the fastest growing chamber of commerce in the United Kingdom, and people there want to see a deal and to see this country move forward. That is the way forward, but if we do not support a deal, a no-deal would have consequences. However, the much more severe consequences would be those for our democracy and for our international reputation as a country if we were to undermine such a major democratic decision.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Is planning still continuing for a no-deal situation, and is the Treasury providing adequate resources for it?

Stephen Barclay: I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that planning is continuing for no deal and that funding is allocated. It is important for the Government to use the time that we have between now and 31 October to ensure that we are prepared, should that eventuality arise, but it is in our interests to secure a deal so that that becomes unnecessary.

T4. [910947] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Nottingham has two world-class universities, and EU nationals on the academic staff and the student body make an extraordinary contribution to those schools. Can the Secretary of State give me a categorical assurance that, however Brexit is resolved, there will be no extra burdens impairing the contribution of EU nationals to those institutions?

Mr Robin Walker: EU nationals play a really important part in all our universities, and I regularly meet the university sector to discuss them. We will absolutely continue to welcome EU nationals to study at our universities after Brexit, but of course, part of the arrangements between us will depend on the future relationship, which will be determined in the next phase of the negotiations. I want to move on so that we can secure the best possible future relationship for our universities.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out for the House why a customs union is the wrong policy choice for the future success of the UK economy?

Stephen Barclay: As we set out in our manifesto, it is in the interests of this country to have an independent trade policy. That is what the Prime Minister has negotiated, and that is the best way for us to deliver the global vision, which is why my hon. Friend and I supported Brexit in the first place.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am sure that the whole Government Front Bench team will be aware of the bad news today from Thomas Cook, whose travel business looks unsustainable as a result of the Brexit process. There is no such thing as a good Brexit, and we can only imagine the economic disaster of a madcap no-deal Brexit. Before the European elections next week, will the Secretary of State confirm that he will respect the views of this House and take a no-deal Brexit off the table completely?

Stephen Barclay: Any news regarding an individual company is always concerning, in particular because our minds turn to the staff and their families who are dealing with the situation. This is an area in which the parties traditionally come together and work together to try to resolve the issue. However, we should not take these things out of context. Only this week, we had the lowest unemployment since 1974, and that is an indication of our economic strength. When bad news is always blamed on Brexit, as some Opposition Members seem to want to do, it is always worth remembering that we have not yet left.

T5. [910950] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State assure me that he has read the major piece of research led by King’s College London and Sheffield University, alongside universities across Europe, into the impact on communities of leaving the EU on any basis? Is he as dreadfully worried as I am that many of the hardest hit will be those towns and cities that voted to leave? On
the basis of these figures, many people are predicting a 20% cut in GDP, which would turn those areas into investment and employment wastelands.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that the people in those communities that voted to leave should not be trusted with their vote, but that is not what he says at a general election when those same communities return Labour MPs. He does not say, when those people look at the economic policy of the Leader of the Opposition, that they are too stupid to be trusted with a vote, yet when it comes to the biggest vote in our country’s history, he seems to be saying that their vote should not be respected.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Earlier this month, the House unanimously declared a climate change emergency. Does the Minister agree that when it comes to tackling the catastrophe that is climate change—or, for that matter, challenging the overweening arrogance of the tech giants or protecting our citizens—we are stronger and have more influence as a consequence of international agreements, and that those agreements therefore enhance rather than diminish our sovereignty?

Mr Robin Walker: I agree with every word the hon. Lady just said. That is one of the reasons why we are seeking to secure the international agreement we have already negotiated with the European Union to allow an orderly withdrawal—one that will allow us to work together effectively on those issues in the future. Indeed, our Prime Minister has been in European capitals this week working collaboratively with other European countries.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister knows that the Government’s myopic obsession with ending freedom of movement is causing a recruitment crisis in the health and social care sector—indeed, the King’s Fund said recently that it was becoming a national emergency. Why are his Government determined to drag that sector into that national emergency?

Stephen Barclay: The only myopic obsession is the Scottish National party’s obsession with an independence referendum. The hon. Gentleman says it is the Government’s obsession, but it is the Migration Advisory Council that said this is a UK-wide issue, which needs to be approached on a UK-wide basis. I remind the House of the answer I gave earlier: there are now 700 more doctors from EU27 countries working in the NHS than there were at the time of the referendum. The numbers are going up, yet the hon. Gentleman constantly talks our country down.
Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:
Offensive Weapons Act 2019
Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) to ask his urgent question, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that, under the House's long-standing resolution on matters sub judice, they must not make reference to individual cases currently before the courts.

10.41 am

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if she will outline the Government's plans for dealing with legacy issues and the investigation of veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I begin with an apology because, as everybody will no doubt have observed by now, I am not the Secretary of State for Defence—I don't have her hair. I wanted to explain why there has been some to-ing and fro-ing since the terms of the urgent question became clear in the last hour.

I am here because we have concluded, at least for the moment, that it would be better that I try to respond to my right hon. Friend's question about soldiers serving in Northern Ireland—obviously the Northern Ireland Office addresses that directly—particularly because the rules were different when soldiers were serving in Northern Ireland. They were there in support of the police and in support of civil powers, which forms a different legal basis than the one that applies if they are fighting abroad in other kinds of conflict. I shall endeavour to be as helpful as I can to my right hon. Friend; if he has any remaining questions he wants to address, I will be happy to follow through with him later, but let me at least try to respond to the burden of his urgent question as it was asked.

I strongly agree, as I suspect that all Members on both sides of the House will strongly agree, that my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the current system—the current situation—in Northern Ireland is not working properly for people on all sides. It is clearly unsupportable and it is unfair in many ways. If a former soldier or a former police officer—perhaps now in their 70s—is concerned about being pursued through the courts for events that happened 30 or 40 years ago, that is a constant worry to them, their family and their friends. Equally, a family member of a victim of republican terrorists in a case where the perpetrators were never brought to justice has a feeling of great worry and concern, and has difficulty moving on. That concern affects people on all sides of the community in Northern Ireland, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that it has to be addressed.

It is for that reason that not just the Government but—I think I am right in saying—parties on both sides of the House and right the away across Northern Ireland believe that a new approach is vital if we are to put this right. That was why the original Stormont House agreement was announced some years ago, and it is why most recently we have been consulting on how to take this forward. We received more than 17,000 responses to the consultation, which shows the depth, breadth and intensity of concern about the current situation. We have now
pretty much finished going through those responses. Some trends are starting to emerge, and we will of course bring them to the House as soon as we decently and responsibly can.

One thing is clear to everybody: everyone agrees on the aim. The difficulty is that, 30 or 40 years after some of the events of the troubles, we need a process that, while having a judicial element, is broader than just judicial. It must allow all sides of the community in Northern Ireland to establish the truth, where it can be established, be fair to all sides and allow people—society as a whole—to draw a line and move on.

While comparisons cannot be exact, because the situation in Northern Ireland is unlike anything else on the planet, this has been done in other societies. One famous example, of course, is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Clearly, that would not work precisely in Northern Ireland, but it is essential that we find an equivalent process that aims at the same outcome of allowing people to feel that justice is being achieved with the truth established, wherever it can be, so that closure can be achieved for all sides on an equal basis wherever possible. That matters particularly for soldiers and police officers who served in Northern Ireland, but also for the families and grieving loved ones of victims.

I will endeavour to respond to my right hon. Friend’s further questions—I am sure he has many—but I hope that helps to set the scene.

Mr Francois: I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. There has been a great deal of media speculation over the last week about what the Ministry of Defence and the Northern Ireland Office want to do, yet no information has been given to the House. I sought this UQ to try to achieve some clarity—we will see how we get on, Sir.

The Secretary of State for Defence gave a very confident and front-footed speech at the Royal United Services Institute yesterday. I was in the audience and it was an excellent speech. She mentioned her intention to try to provide legal protection particularly for veterans who had served in the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have seen articles in The Times and elsewhere to that effect, but thus far I am afraid we have had no specific details. If press reports are accurate, the MOD is aiming at something along the lines of a statute of limitations, taking force perhaps 10 years after a conflict has ended, after which no prosecution would be possible unless exceptional or compelling evidence were to come forward.

If that is the case, the Defence Secretary would be honouring the Conservative party’s 2017 manifesto—that would make a nice change—which reads:

“We will protect our brave armed forces personnel from persistent legal claims, which distress those who risk their lives for us, cost the taxpayer millions and undermine the armed forces”.

That is plain as a pikestaff, and if she is to do it, well and good, but we would like more details.

I will explain one reason why this is so pressing, in terms of the persecution of Iraq veterans. The MOD set up the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which spent years looking into these cases, but unfortunately it became a racket. Several law firms—particularly the ironically named Public Interest Lawyers, led by an appalling man called Phil Shiner—trawled Iraq to encourage people to come forward and make false allegations. Basically, they made some of it up. That all came out in a court case when the trial collapsed after they admitted that they had fabricated evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer)—a fellow member of the Defence Committee—then conducted a Sub-Committee inquiry into IHAT, which proved so shocking that the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), shut the team down. I am sure that the whole House would agree that we must never do that again.

Turning to Northern Ireland, the Minister—I have a great deal of time for him, but perhaps slightly less time for his Department—rightly said that the NIO, under the Stormont House agreement, agreed with the parties in Northern Ireland to establish so-called legacy institutions to look into the past. The NIO’s interpretation of that means that it will set up some form of commission that will go back 50 years to 1968-69 and re-examine every fatality since—some 3,500 cases. Any serviceman or member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, George Cross, who fired a fatal shot will therefore be re-investigated. However, the alleged terrorists will not because, under the Good Friday agreement, Tony Blair gave them so-called letters of comfort, which mean that they are immune from prosecution. No alleged terrorist who was given one of those letters has been successfully prosecuted. The nearest we came was with the alleged Hyde Park bomber, but when he produced his letter of comfort in court, the judge abandoned the trial and declared an abuse of process. The entire process will be utterly one-sided, because service personnel and members of the RUC GC will be liable to prosecution, while those with letters of comfort get off scot-free.

After the appalling, tragic events in Londonderry, we all want the Northern Ireland Executive re-established—of course we do—but that cannot come at the price of some rancid, backstairs deal between the NIO and Sinn Féin-IRA that sells Corporal Johnny Atkins down the mark II? Fourthly, what discussions have taken place between NIO Ministers and civil servants, and Sinn Féin-IRA, and is there any truth in the rumours that
they have demanded the continued investigation of British veterans as the price of re-entering the Executive? Fifthly, when will the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland come to the House to make an oral statement to update us so that Members can question her in detail about the NIO’s proposals?

Sixthly, and lastly, what would the Minister say to former Royal Marine David Griffin, aged 78, whom I met on Monday? He is being re-investigated for a shooting in 1972 for which he was investigated, and completely cleared, at the time? If he wants to discuss the matter with Mr Griffin in person, would he be kind enough to go down to the Royal Hospital Chelsea, because that is where he now lives?

**John Penrose:** I will endeavou to respond to those six points, but may I begin by saying that I am sure that my right hon. Friend speaks for everybody in this House—he certainly speaks for me—when he says that we will have no rancid political deals here? That is not acceptable. If we are going to ask people potentially to put their lives on the line by serving in Her Majesty’s armed forces anywhere in the world, we need to make sure that we do the right thing by them when they have done the right thing by their country. As somebody who has served and who understands the importance of military discipline, my right hon. Friend will know that that is not unqualified, because there are rules within the armed forces. However, provided that people have adhered to those rules, we in this place, on both sides of the aisle, and more broadly across society, owe something in return, so there absolutely will be no rancid political deals on my watch, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be absolutely certain to make sure that that will not happen more broadly.

Before I come to my right hon. Friend’s six questions, may I put him right on a couple of other things? On his point about whether or not the Secretary of State announced a statute of limitations or an intention to move towards one, he is right that the details have not yet been fully put out. I understand that there will be a consultation with more details attached to it. Some press reports are talking about a presumption of non-prosecution rather than a statute of limitations; we will have to wait and see.

My right hon. Friend’s first question was about when the MOD will publish details. I am afraid that I cannot answer that as a Northern Ireland Office Minister. I imagine it will want to move forward fairly briskly, but to get a categorical answer, I am afraid he will have to raise that point either privately or at the next Defence questions.

**Mr Francois:** On Monday.

**John Penrose:** Exactly.

My right hon. Friend also made a point about the letters of comfort that were issued by a previous Government. I reassure him and other Members that legal reports have been issued on those letters since the case began by talking about victims—those who were killed, those who were killed unlawfully—and the families of those victims, who all these years on still seek truth and put together with enormous care.

My right hon. Friend asked whether Sinn Féin-IRA, as he characterised them, demanded a price in the talks. Not to my knowledge at all, but I think that goes back to his point about no rancid deals.

My right hon. Friend asked when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would make a statement on our plans. I think the answer to that is as soon as we have had a chance to discuss the issue in detail with different parties, both in Northern Ireland and here. I hope all Members will understand that while there is agreement on the direction and the outcome that everybody wants, the details matter hugely. He gave examples of real concerns about the initial set of Stormont agreement proposals for dealing with legacy. He could have given examples about other concerns. We have to deal with those and come up with proposals that work in detail and that have acceptance from all sides of the community in Northern Ireland. It is worth everybody’s while to take a little bit of extra time now to get the details right to come up with a process that everyone can live with, and to do the detailed design work—the pre-legislative scrutiny, if you like—so that we get that essential work right. The answer, therefore, is as soon as we decently can, but given the sensitivities involved and the precision required to come up with a process that, after decades, will stand the test of time and of warring views within Northern Ireland society, I hope my right hon. Friend will understand that we need something that is robust and put together with enormous care.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister rightly began by talking about victims—those who were killed, those who were killed unlawfully—and the families of those victims, who all these years on still seek truth and to know what has happened to their loved ones. As a matter of record, which I know the Minister will confirm, the overwhelming majority of the killings that took place in Northern Ireland were committed by paramilitaries, republican or loyalist—
Mr François: Terrorists.

Tony Lloyd: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in using that word. Therefore, by definition, those were illegal and in need of investigation, where there can be no bar because of the passage of time. Every serving soldier swears an oath of allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, to “observe and obey all orders of Her Majesty, Her heirs and successors and of the generals and officers set over me.”

It should be axiomatic that when a soldier has obeyed those Queen’s regulations and acted within the orders set out, that individual soldier should be protected from vexatious attacks—that is legitimate whether in foreign fields or in the context of Northern Ireland. But I have to say to the Minister, and I am not sure he wants to disagree with me on this, that it is very hard for me to recognise that when a soldier has broken that solemn oath of allegiance to the Queen—a solemn oath to uphold our laws—and wilfully broken it, leading to the death of individuals, that should be put beyond time for investigation. We have to be very clear in this House that investigating those most serious crimes, whether committed by republican terrorists, loyalist terrorists or those in the police service or the Army who wilfully have broken our laws? That is the important distinction. The important distinction is between protection from vexatious claims for those who legitimately carried out the Queen’s orders—that is right and proper and we should establish that—and no protection for those who wilfully broke our laws.

John Penrose: I think the hon. Gentleman is making a central and uncontroversial point, but we need to be very careful in how we approach it. He has to be right that outright crimes such as murder must be pursued, and be pursued even-handedly. In defence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), I should say that I do not think he is suggesting anything else.

As I was saying earlier, military discipline means that the duty we all owe to members of Her Majesty’s armed forces is not an unqualified one—there are limits to it for people who may have failed to follow the orders they were given or failed to act in the right way. But we need to be careful about being resolutely even-handed about it. One of the many difficulties that many people have about the situation currently in Northern Ireland is that it is extremely difficult to mount effective investigations into many of these deaths. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the majority of the deaths that occurred originated from republican terrorists, and it is therefore difficult in many cases to find enough evidence to make those cases stand up in court. It is not necessarily a question of prosecuting authorities not trying to be even-handed; they have to be able to follow evidence that is available to them and see whether or not there is a decent case.

The fact remains that the Government are a great deal better at maintaining records 30 or 40 years later than perhaps the IRA was at all. It is therefore extremely difficult to pursue some cases, which is one of the many reasons—it may not be the only one—why, to many eyes, the ratio of prosecutions is as skewed as I think the hon. Gentleman was trying to suggest. That is the concern that people have, but I can reassure him, as I am sure everybody else present would, that it has to be everybody’s intention to pursue cases for which there is evidence on a completely even-handed basis. We obviously need to make sure that we deal with all the others, too, which is why we have to have a process that is broader than just a judicial one and that allows people to get to the truth, in so far as it ever can be reached at this late stage, to move on with their lives and to draw a line under a pretty terrible series of episodes in Northern Ireland’s past.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have an interest to declare, having served in Iraq. With respect to the consultation, what trend has emerged in the views of veterans of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and might we be surprised by it?

John Penrose: The simple answer to that is that the analysis is only just starting to emerge now, and I have not seen it broken down in the way that my right hon. Friend describes, so I am afraid I cannot give him a factual answer. Once the results are out, I am sure people will pore over them and we may then be able to come up with an answer. I apologise that I cannot come up with a solid factual answer for my right hon. Friend at the moment.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We acknowledge the challenges that come with military service. We do need to be sensitive to those challenges and to recognise the volatile circumstances that came with serving in Northern Ireland during the troubles, but nobody is above the law. The Good Friday agreement remains incredibly important today, and we have a duty to defer to the frameworks underneath it. When he was Prime Minister, David Cameron gave a formal apology for the events of Bloody Sunday. He said:

“What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong.”—[Official Report, 15 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 739.]

I suggest that, having acknowledged that, it is reasonable that we determine whether—whether—anyone is culpable of criminality for the events of Bloody Sunday. Are the Government committed to ensuring that those who lost loved ones, on all sides of the conflict, have the means to pursue both justice and truth?

John Penrose: The straightforward answer to that last question is yes, and I do not think there is any disagreement, on either side of the House, about that central aim. The question, of course—I think this is inherent in what the hon. Lady asked—is about the details of how. Once we have had a chance to announce to the House the results of the consultation, we will need to start work on the detailed reactions to that consultation, to formulate a Bill that will be acceptable to deliver what we are talking about in a way that works for all sides of the community in Northern Ireland.
On the point about Bloody Sunday cases, the hon. Lady will of course be aware that the Director of Public Prosecutions recently announced, having reviewed all the various different cases, that all but one of them will not be taken forward. There is not enough evidence for any sort of reasonable prospect of a prosecution, so all but one of them have been withdrawn.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I completed seven tours in Northern Ireland, all with the infantry or associated units. I lost many men and I was involved in fatality shootings. I was investigated, along with others. The investigations were thorough, aggressive and bloody awful to go through. When the investigations were completed, we sometimes had to go to court to prove that we had acted in accordance with the yellow card. In 1978, I told two soldiers who were with me that because they had been to court and been proved innocent and had acted within the law, they would never, ever be asked to do such a thing again. How the hell can our Government allow such people possibly to be investigated again?

John Penrose: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks with huge authority given his personal background and experience in the armed forces. I think the whole House understands that the examples that he has just given are a specific and very good illustration of my earlier comments in response to the initial question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about why the current situation is not working properly for anybody. We need to get to a point where, unless there is some brand new and credible piece of evidence that changes the situation, but in most cases that is not the case—

Bob Stewart: They asked them to come and give evidence.

John Penrose: Exactly so. Unless there is something that is brand new and that was not available at the time—in the vast majority of cases that is not the case—then at that point people should be entitled to consider that they do not have to face further pursuance through the court. Therefore, my point is that we must get this sorted and sorted soon, and we must come up with a process that works for all the different sides of the equation, as I laid out in my initial response. I guess what I am saying is that we are in violent agreement on this. My hon. and gallant Friend illustrates forcefully and accurately why the current situation is not acceptable and cannot be allowed to stand.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response so far. Will he explain the fundamental difference between soldiers following orders in uniform in Afghanistan and Iraq and soldiers following orders in uniform in Northern Ireland, other than a drive by militant republicans to rewrite history to make it seem as if their bloodlust against Captain Nairac and the three Scottish soldiers and all those other men and women slaughtered by evil people was in some way acceptable? We must have equal treatment for all who have served in Army uniform wherever it was, or is, in the world.

John Penrose: May I start by saying that I certainly agree with the underlying premise of the hon. Gentleman’s point, which is that we need to make sure that we are doing the right thing by our armed forces? The difficulty lies with the legal underpinnings. The legal difference between soldiers serving abroad versus soldiers serving in Northern Ireland in respect of the police is important. It means that our route to arriving at the goal that he wants to get us to, and that I want to get us to, has to be a different one. Let me take a specific case in point: people who suggest that we should have some kind of a statute of limitations for forces that have been serving abroad need to realise that if we try to do that in the UK, that statute of limitations, according to human rights law, would have to apply to all sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Mr Francois: They got letters of comfort. They are scot-free.

John Penrose: The Northern Ireland letters of comfort, as I have already said, do not stop prosecutions under the latest legal guidance. Therefore, we have to come up with something that gets us to the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to illustrate, but it must have a different legal foundation to it. I wish it were simpler. I wish that it were not the case, but it is and we have to take the world as we find it. That should be an explanation about why it is hard, but not a satisfactory justification for not trying and not getting there, and not getting there soon.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I say to the Minister of State that I have every sympathy with his position at the Dispatch Box? I did exactly the same and had exactly the same advice, which was fundamentally wrong, when I was in the Northern Ireland Office as well as in the Ministry of Defence. Like many colleagues, I served in Northern Ireland. When I came back, I was given a general service medal. I was on operations. To us, peacekeeping there was no different to peacekeeping anywhere else in the world. That is what British Army soldiers do. To stand here and say that there is a legal difference between a soldier going on ops in Iraq, Cyprus or anywhere else in the world and a soldier going on ops in Northern Ireland is fundamentally wrong, and I challenged and challenged and challenged that advice. How on earth have we got into this position where we will not defend our own soldiers because of some technicality that we were not on ops? We were on ops and we were defending the public and our guys were killed. I will not have terrorists mentioned in the same breath as British soldiers.

John Penrose: I could not agree more. My right hon. Friend rightly points out that he has stood in my shoes on this issue. I am sure he is absolutely right that, to anybody serving in Her Majesty’s armed forces—whether they served in peacekeeping operations or not, and whether they served in Northern Ireland or in other parts of the world—the practical effect will feel the same.

Sir Mike Penning: I was given a medal for it.

John Penrose: As my right hon. Friend rightly points out, he was given a medal for it. The only point on which I would pull him up is that, although the practical effect may feel the same, the legal underpinnings—again, I appreciate that he contested this—are different. Although
we may wish that were not so, it is so. Therefore, we have to come up with something that will withstand legal challenge. As my right hon. Friend for Rayleigh and Wickford rightly pointed out, there are people out there who will try to knock legal holes in any answer that we come up with unless it is legally robust. We have to acknowledge the legal difference and find an answer that works, even though we are trying to get to the same answer in each case. If we cannot do that, we may come up with something that sounds great when we announce it, but that will get legal holes knocked in it; and that would mean that we were not protecting our veterans in the way in which everybody here wants us to do.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I represent Darlington, which is the nearest large town to Catterick garrison, so there are many hundreds of veterans living in my constituency. None of them has ever asked or expected to be treated differently or as if they were above the law in any situation, but there is deep concern about this issue. There is also deep concern in the wider community that individual soldiers may be held responsible for failings that they alone do not own—that a lack of preparedness, or a lack of understanding or anticipation of the context in which they would be serving at the time, may have led to certain things happening that those individuals could be held responsible for. That is a real and deep worry. Will the Minister assure me that individual veterans in my constituency will not be held responsible for actions that they alone are not responsible for?

John Penrose: That is precisely why we need to come up with these proposals as fast as we can. It is clear from both sides of the House that the time for action is now—well, it was probably several years ago actually—and that this situation cannot be allowed to persist. The hon. Lady’s example is only one of a spectrum of concerns, depending on which part of the community one talks to in Northern Ireland and who one talks to in the UK. However, that concern is absolutely valid and we cannot allow this situation to continue. We will come back to this as soon as it is decent to do so; and by “decent”, I mean when we have a chance of getting something that is practically going to work, rather than something that sounds good as a soundbite. We need to ensure that this thing works under legal challenge.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is it not ironic that throughout the whole Brexit process we have been bending over backwards to treat Northern Ireland the same as the rest of the UK, and we are now about to treat Northern Ireland differently? I understand the sensitivities of the Good Friday agreement and the Stormont House agreement, but surely this can be sorted out with robust and strong leadership. I put it to the Minister that no other country in the world would treat their veterans in this way. He goes on about taking more time, and going through this and that. All this time, veterans—including in my constituency—are suffering.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I certainly did not want to imply that we are countenancing being leisurely about this. This situation has been wrong for many years. The only reason for not announcing something tomorrow—or, indeed, today or yesterday—is simply that we need to ensure that we have put all the answers from the consultation out and in front of the House, so people have a chance to work through the details and ask, “All right, what does this mean in practice then?” We need to move as fast as we can, but it has to be as fast as we can in a way that is consistent with forging a consensus in Northern Ireland. We have to ensure that whatever answer we come up with sticks, survives and works for both sides of the community, otherwise it will come unravelled in the fullness of time and we will have failed to protect our veterans from the kind of problems that we have all heard about and that I think everyone here agrees are absolutely unacceptable.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is quite right when he says that this question really ought to be answered by the Secretary of State for Defence, because it is her intervention that has left the Government with a policy that is totally lacking in any coherence.

Quite apart from the inconsistencies that others have highlighted, we are now, we understand from the Secretary of State for Defence, to disapply the European convention on human rights in this area. Is that Government policy that she speaks of, and if so, where does the Minister, as a Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office, think that leaves the Good Friday agreement?

John Penrose: Let me first address the right hon. Gentleman’s point about whether this is a matter for the Ministry of Defence or the Northern Ireland Office. He is of course right that the Ministry of Defence has a major, major stake in getting this right. As he would expect—as everybody would expect—the Secretary of State for Defence wants to make sure that this issue is dealt with as promptly as possible. The Ministry of Defence is not the only Department to have a stake, because clearly there are former police officers in Northern Ireland—members of the PSNI—who could also be vulnerable to such predatory legal attack, or whatever, and we need to make sure that they are properly dealt with too. He is right that the MOD is a vital part, but it is not all of it, and that is why the issue goes broader than just veterans of Her Majesty’s armed forces.

On human rights, as I said earlier, all we have to go on at the moment are the press reports and the outlines of the Secretary of State for Defence’s proposals. I did not see those as having—and I do not think she meant them to have—anything to do with contradicting human rights. It is clear that anything we come up with, if it is to be legally robust, has to be compliant with article 2 in human rights terms, because if we do not have a process that is compliant with article 2, we will have failed to protect our veterans, whether they are former members of the armed forces or former members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. If we fail to protect them from proper legal challenge because we have designed a process that is not compliant with article 2, we will have failed in our duty and failed to deliver what everybody here, of all parties, wishes to achieve.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I understand that the Legacy Inquest Unit is powering through its work. May I urge the Minister to consider the timescale for inquests while considering what other bodies he is going
to set up? May I also urge him to make sure that veterans are properly supported throughout the inquest process? To most people, an inquest looks like a court and smells like a court, and it is very important that they are helped through the process.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about people facing current cases, regardless of whether we wish to design an alternative process that may mean in future many of them will not have to undergo the process, which I think everybody here agrees would be sensible where possible and appropriate. For those who have to do so, however, we absolutely need to make sure that there is proper legal support. As I said, I would regard that as absolutely part of the duty that we owe to our former soldiers and other members of our armed forces.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister is speaking as though this issue has landed on him unexpectedly from a clear blue sky, but we are talking about events that happened 40 years ago, and much of it could have been predicted. Although of course we want malicious cases to be dismissed, will he confirm his exact policy on cases that may have some legitimacy but have already been tried and within which we would expect soldiers to be treated fairly?

John Penrose: I assure the hon. Gentleman that this issue has not landed on anybody’s desk in the Northern Ireland Office out of a clear blue sky—it has been taking up a very large proportion of everybody’s care and attention. It is probably fair to say that it was doing so under former Labour Governments as well as the current Government, and indeed the coalition Government. It is certainly not a new problem, and it has clearly defeated successive attempts to solve it. That is why we have to proceed as fast as possible, but with care.

With regard to people who have already faced cases, clearly we need to make sure that they are treated fairly within the law. Bearing in mind Mr Speaker’s earlier strictures, I probably should not comment on individual cases, but I am sure that everyone here would stand up for the notion that yes, clearly, everyone should be treated fairly within the law.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I deployed to Afghanistan twice and to Iraq and to Northern Ireland, all in quite quick succession. I can tell the Minister that I received operational training and operational kit. I carried operational rules of engagement. I received operational pay, and I received an operational medal for all four of those tours. The distinction that a soldier is aware of the legal premise on which they are deployed is not true—it is not fair, and it stinks. Troops do not get to choose whether they deploy on an operational tour because of the legal underpinning that the Government have chosen, and it is unreasonable to assert that now. We must limit their liability immediately.

John Penrose: I completely agree. I was trying to make this point in response to a couple of earlier questions, but let me have another crack at it. For members of Her Majesty’s armed forces serving on the ground, no matter where they are, if they are on similar kinds of operation, the practical effect and feel of those operations will be the same. My hon. Friend, who is my parliamentary neighbour in Somerset, is absolutely right to make that point. It is not an acceptable justification for inaction for any Government to say, “The legal basis is different, and therefore we cannot solve this.”

All I am saying is that the legal solution has to be different because the legal basis is different, even though soldiers may not care or worry about it. If we do not take that difference of legal basis into account, the answer we come up with will not work in protecting them. We want to protect them properly and successfully. If we do not, the first malicious prosecution that is mounted in a court and knocks a hole in it will show that our efforts have been in vain. My hon. Friend is right. This is an explanation of why it is different; it is not a justification for not acting, nor is it a justification for not succeeding in coming up with an identical outcome, even though it has to be based on different legal foundations.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester is a proud garrison city, and I am proud to represent ex-service and current service families, many of whom have raised their concerns with me. Their concerns are generally twofold. The first is that these seem to be arbitrary fishing investigations—and investigations are just as stressful as prosecutions. Secondly, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about rancid deals. Of course there had to be a deal under the Good Friday agreement, but my constituents’ concern is clear: that deal should be applied equally and fairly to all sides.

John Penrose: “Equally and fairly to all sides” have to be our watch-words for the outcome of publishing the results of the consultation and the process of coming up with a Bill that works. It has to be equal and fair to both sides, otherwise it will not endure, it will not work, and it will not protect our forces in the way that we all want.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): As the MP for Moray, I represent a large number of veterans, and I share their disgust at the way they have been treated by this Government. The Minister’s answers have been full, but when speaking about future legislation and the results of the consultation, he has said “soon”, “very quickly” and “shortly”. He has given no specific timeframe. When can my constituents and people across the United Kingdom expect to hear from the Government specific dates for the plans, to ensure that we can hold the Government to account on their promises?

John Penrose: I wish I could give my hon. Friend a specific date. We are trying to get through this as fast as we can. I hope he will understand that, with 17,000 responses, each telling a story of personal tragedy, we needed to ensure we were honouring the sense in which those were provided. Having worked through that, we need to move at pace, and we will endeavour to do so. I cannot give him a precise date today, but I will undertake to take back to the Department the very clear message from today, which is that we need to get on with this and move as fast as we can, but we need to ensure we are proceeding in a way that will endure and come up with a robust answer that, as we just heard, is fair and equal for all sides.
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Like all Members here, I have veterans in my constituency who are very angry at the way this issue has been handled and extremely concerned about issues being dredged up from 20, 30 or 40 years ago in what they consider to be an unfair manner. There has been a lot of press speculation in recent days and mixed messages from the Government, which has only increased the anxiety that many veterans feel. Does the Minister understand the concern caused, as well as the need for clarity and certainty that it will be dealt with as quickly as possible?

John Penrose: Yes, yes, and emphatically yes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The borough of Kettering is blessed with many veterans who served in Northern Ireland, and they are outraged by this process. The previous Labour Government issued letters of comfort to known terrorists, and now a Conservative Government are effectively threatening prosecution of veterans, many of whom have already faced court cases. The Minister says he has received legal advice from the Northern Ireland Office. Will he reassure the House that he is challenging that advice, not simply accepting it? He said that Sinn Féin is not pressing for these cases to be examined—he said he had no knowledge of that. Can he confirm 100% that Sinn Féin is not pressing for these veterans to be prosecuted as a condition of setting up the new Northern Ireland Executive?

John Penrose: I am not in that part of those talks, so I would not be able to tell my hon. Friend that one way or another. I can say, however—this returns to my earlier answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford—that rancid deals should have no part in how we treat our veterans in any case.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The best way for wounds to heal is to stop picking at the scabs, and we must stop treating Northern Ireland as “other”. Our military, police or civilians will have far greater confidence only when rules apply globally, and I see no merit in perpetrating the “otherness” of Northern Ireland. Rules should apply to our military, police and civilians, whether in Basra or Belfast. The status of the unbalanced letters of comfort must be reviewed and clarified as they distort the arguments. The scales of justice must be able to balance, but those letters distort them beyond all chance of that happening.

John Penrose: I agree strongly that the scales of justice must be able to balance, and it is not just a question of balancing in one or two cases—they must balance for all cases, and be seen to balance by all sides. We are all here today because there is a widespread perception, on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland, that those scales are tilted for different reasons in different ways. My hon. Friend is right to make that point, and I remind him of my earlier answer on the letters of comfort. Those letters have now been reviewed, and the latest legal report states that they do not provide immunity from prosecution—

Mr Francois: But no one has ever been prosecuted!

John Penrose: They may not have ever been prosecuted, but the letters do not provide immunity from prosecution.

Mr Francois: What is the difference?

John Penrose: The difference is that, were a case to be brought tomorrow, those letters would not be a piece of legal body armour. It is important that we make that point, and I hope the message will go out loud and clear from the Chamber that anyone who thinks they can swan around scot-free as a result of that does not have the legal protection that some people may have thought they did.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is hovering—

Mr Duncan Smith: I recognise that I arrived slightly late, but I wondered—

Mr Speaker: Well, I am in a generous mood, so in recognition of the right hon. Gentleman’s military background and former leadership of his party, I think the House should indulge him.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and I apologise that I came in when the Minister was already on his feet. I served in Northern Ireland and in what was then Rhodesia. I received a general service medal for one campaign, and a separate campaign medal for the other—as has been said, they were both operations. We were sent to Northern Ireland, and I lost friends, particularly Robert Nairac—I am sorry I was not here when he was mentioned. I do not know how I can honestly, and with a clean heart, say that my Government represent the best interests of ex-servicemen and women who have served their country. I simply state to the Minister this simple principle: when natural justice collides with the law, we change the law.

John Penrose: That has to be correct. That is why we are talking about bringing forward a Bill in this place to change the law to put this right. My right hon. Friend is also right to say—I think he is echoing the point made by my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey)—that for serving soldiers who get campaign or operation medals, whatever it may be, it feels the same whether or not the legal underpinning of the operation is different. We therefore have to come up with an Act of Parliament that ensures that protections are the same, even if they are arrived at through a different legal route. Either way, it absolutely and essentially has to be robust in the event of legal challenge, otherwise we will have failed in our duty to look after our veterans, no matter where they have served.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think that is stretching the point. Points of order come later. Does the point of order relate to these—

Mr Sheerman: Am I right thinking, Mr Speaker, that you take points of order after statements?

Mr Speaker: Yes, but we have not had the statements yet. If the point of order appertained to these exchanges, then possibly—but no. Reference was made to the hon.
Gentleman’s service earlier and I say for the benefit of those who are attending our proceedings in the House but are not Members that the confetti showered upon the hon. Gentleman on account of his long service was recognition of the fact that he was elected first to the House on 3 May 1979 and, 40 years and 13 days later, the hon. Gentleman is still here. He has been in the House without interruption for that 40-year period, upon which we all congratulate him.

Business of the House

11.36 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 20 May will include:

Monday 20 May—Proceedings on the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on medical cannabis under prescription. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Tuesday 21 May—Second Reading of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

Wednesday 22 May—Opposition day (un-allotted). There will be a debate on an opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 23 May—Debate on a motion on the Yemen peace process, followed by matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 24 May—The House will not be sitting.

I can also inform colleagues that the withdrawal agreement Bill will have a Second Reading during the week beginning Monday 3 June 2019. The Bill will be introduced as soon as possible to give colleagues the chance to consider the provisions within it. I will make a further business statement next week in the usual way.

May I take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) the very best as a new Minister in the Justice Department? He ably stood in for me in a number of Leader debates and I am sure he will be a great success in his new role.

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week, an opportunity to promote good mental health for us all. This year’s theme is body image, which can have a real impact on mental health and wellbeing. I congratulate all those helping to raise awareness of these vitally important issues.

Finally, tomorrow is also International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, which is recognised in more than 130 countries. I encourage as many Members as possible to take part in the debate later today to promote equal rights across the world.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. I am pleased that she said we will be debating the withdrawal agreement Bill, but I would just like some clarification. Will that be on 4 June, or 5 June as No. 10 has announced? Are we going to get business from No. 10 in future, or will it actually be announced here in the Chamber? Can the Leader confirm whether we will have the meaningful vote before the Bill? Will she also clarify what the Brexit Secretary said—I know she said the Bill will be introduced—to the Lords EU Committee yesterday? He said he accepted that MPs need to see the Bill before the vote on Second Reading, but that many of the issues raised by the Bill have
already been debated. It would be helpful to know whether there will be something new in the Bill or whether everything in the agreement will be in the Bill.

There have been noises off from No. 10, which has said that the Bill will be published next week. If it is published before 23 May, will the Leader publish the advice on whether that would breach the purdah rules, and perhaps lay it in the Library? We do have an impartial civil service and do not want it compromised while an election is going on. It is important in the interests of democracy that we see the Bill as soon as possible but purdah rules must not be breached.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has said that the agreement could be done and dusted by the summer recess. I assume that that is confirmation that we will get a summer recess. Will the Leader say when that is likely to be?

This is so sad for Parliament. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the House has routinely sat for 150 days a year. This Session is no doubt the same, and there is absolutely no end in sight. We are now straddling the calendar years. There have been no Divisions for a month apart from the one on the Opposition day earlier this week. On Monday, the House sat for just 3 hours and 34 minutes, and the Government, having refused to grant Opposition days for 150 days, have now given us 50 of them. We are grateful for that, because we can show people that there is an alternative.

Parliament is in paralysis, with the Government in their offices but not in power. Some of them are moving offices, and I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who served the Leader well as her deputy.

I turn now to something the Leader said last week. I will write to her formally, but I thought she was somewhat discourteous in saying last week that I did not read my emails. My question to her was, as it is today: will she ensure that Ministers are aware of the ministerial code, which says:

“Ministers intending to make an official visit within the United Kingdom must inform in advance, and in good time, the MPs whose constituencies are to be included within the itinerary.”

Please will she ensure that all Ministers are aware of that code when they visit our constituencies?

Will the Government look again at the voter identification pilots: their key policy that is subverting democracy? In the local elections, 819 people were denied their vote, and the Local Government Chronicle identified that this included an 87-year-old woman in Pendle. The Leader of the House and I both know how hard we as women have struggled to get the vote. The number of people turned away in some areas could have influenced the election result. In Mid Sussex, 78 people were denied a vote, and in three cases a candidate won by fewer than 25 votes.

The Electoral Commission has said that if the Government pursue this policy and people are not able to provide identification, 7.5% of the electorate—3.5 million people—will be unable to vote. If people are asked to produce their passports or driving licences, 11 million citizens will be disenfranchised. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has called for a debate. Can we have a debate in Government time on this dangerous, discriminatory and undemocratic policy?

At business questions last week, the Leader of the House said that the Government are “determined to be world leading in our actions, not words, to tackle the global challenge of climate change.”—[Official Report, 9 May 2019; Vol. 659, c. 672.] She gave us a few examples. It is actually a climate emergency. Will she explain why the Government announced last week that they will increase VAT on domestic solar installations from 5% to 20%? The Renewable Energy Association has said:

“This change risks setting back the UK decarbonisation of homes and businesses in the UK by a number of years.”

The Government are relentlessly supportive of fracking, despite the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy having found that only 12% of people support it. We want action, not words, to combat the climate emergency.

I join my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and other hon. Members in mentioning that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) have passed the 40-year mark. My hon. Friend is an assiduous attender of business questions. He is also a great supporter of John Clare, so he will be pleased that we have a new poet laureate in Simon Armitage, whom we wish well.

I also pay tribute to the late Brian Walden, who served here in the House and was an excellent interviewer on television. When I was applying for a job in TV, he was a practice interviewee for me. I did not get the job, which means he was a good interviewer and interviewee. We acknowledge his public service in all those fields.

I wanted to mention Philippa Helme, who is leaving next week, so that people would have a chance to say goodbye to her properly. She is the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, and she joined the House of Commons in 1983—as, incidentally, did our Chief Whip.

Philippa has been Clerk of the Welsh Affairs, Science and Technology and Defence Committees, where she formed excellent relationships with formidable Chairs from Renée Short to Michael Mates and James Arbuthnot. She was parliamentary adviser to the Cabinet Office between 2002 and 2005, and head of the Office of the Chief Executive between 2008 and 2010. She was deputy head of the Committee Office for four years before becoming Principal Clerk of the Table Office in 2014. Throughout her career, she has relentlessly questioned received wisdom and settled convictions—I suppose she got on well with you, Mr Speaker—and has combined that with kindness to more junior staff. People have liked working for her and being given space by her to develop themselves. Her door is always open, and has always been open to me, and she has never failed to answer my questions. It was a delight to see her at the Clerks’ Table, and she got there on her own terms. It must have been incredibly difficult at the time to combine a career with family life, but she did that. It was not easy for women.

We all thank Philippa for her service to the House, and wish her clean sailing, fair winds and following seas. She will know what that means.
Mr Speaker: May I just say a big thank you to the shadow Leader of the House for that tribute to Philippa Helme? I first came to know Philippa in 1997 when I was appointed to the Welsh Affairs Committee of which she was the extremely accomplished Clerk, and I have known her for the last 22 years. As the shadow Leader of the House said, she has served the House with great distinction, and I look forward very much to hosting the retirement reception for her in Speaker’s House—next Thursday, if memory serves me correctly.

Andrea Leadsom: I echo the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to Philippa Helme. She has been an assiduous Clerk for many years, and we wish her a very happy and energising retirement. I am sure that she will feel some elements of relief in escaping from this place—which reminds me that the hon. Lady is always after recess dates, which suggests that she, too, is desperate to get away from it.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement Bill. She will be aware that the Bill is not subject to a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. There will be a Second Reading debate on a Bill that is yet to be introduced. Section 13 of the Act stipulates that a meaningful vote must be passed for ratification of the deal, and the Government will ensure that the conditions are met to enable ratification to take place. There will be no issues relating to purdah that has been carefully checked, and there are no such implications. As I have said, the Bill will be introduced soon so that colleagues can consider it.

The hon. Lady asked when the Bill would be completed. We have made it very clear that we will be able to leave the European Union on the first day of the month following ratification of the treaty. We would like that to happen this summer, and we will work hard to ensure that it does, but, as ever, there are discussions in the usual channels about the programming of the Bill.

The hon. Lady referred to the length of the Session. It was set out at the beginning that this would be an extended Session because of the enormous change that would be involved in our leaving the European Union. However, we have achieved some superb legislation during this period. Our 44th Bill, the Offensive Weapons Bill, received Royal Assent today. The excellent energy cap has been introduced, and the Tenant Fees Act 2019, which will help people who have been harshly treated by their landlords, has been enacted. So there has been a lot that is good about this Session—and, very importantly, we have to leave the European Union. All colleagues can, of course, influence the end of the Session by voting for the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill.

The hon. Lady asked about the House rising early. I must say that I was rather astonished on Monday. First there were two very important statements, one on the Tessa Jowell brain cancer mission and the other on domestic abuse, and then there was the Second Reading of a Government Bill that had the potential to affect business rates and our high streets. There was huge scope for colleagues to talk about many issues relating to their constituencies yet only one Government Back Bencher made a full speech during Monday’s debate, and there were no Scottish National party contributions at all—not even interventions—and no Labour Back Benchers spoke. It is not for me, I gently say to the House, to determine who speaks in debates; I merely make the time available. So I do not accept in any sense that it is for the Government to determine when the House rises; that is a matter decided by the demand from colleagues to make contributions in debates.

The hon. Lady asked me to ensure that all ministerial visits are advised. All Ministers are well aware of the ministerial code. She again made reference to a visit she feels she was left out of; that was nothing to do with the Minister concerned, who in fact was the person who alerted the hon. Lady to the fact of that meeting going ahead.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about voter ID pilots. She will appreciate that there are huge risks at present with individuals not having to provide any form of ID whatsoever, and merely going up to polling booths and saying they are individual X or Y. There are many anecdotal cases where people have turned up at polling booths and been told they have already voted when they clearly have not. It is because of such problems that we have to ensure the integrity of our electoral system and give the public confidence that our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

The Electoral Commission’s own evaluation shows that the 2018 voter ID pilots were a success and the overwhelming majority of people cast their vote without a problem. We need to continue to understand how voter ID will work on a wider scale and what works best for voters, so it is important that we continue piloting before any national roll-out takes place.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about action not words with regard to climate change, so let me remind her that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation. We have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010. In the last year we have generated record levels of solar and wind energy. We have planted over 15 million trees since 2010. We have opened the world’s largest offshore wind farm and the world’s first floating offshore wind farm in Scotland. That is action not words.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on revisiting the Mental Health Act 1983 so that in new legislation we have as an absolute priority supporting young people and children? It is truly shocking that one in 10 young people and children have a mental health issue that lasts throughout their lives, and we must treat them in a better way than we do at present.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important matter and it is particularly right that he should do so during mental health awareness week. I am pleased to be able to tell him that we have championed investment in children’s mental health services. Last year, there was an overall 17% increase in funding in real terms, to around £226 million, and spending by clinical commissioning groups has gone up by 33% since 2015-16 to £687 million, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that more needs to be done, and that is why we have committed to transforming children’s mental health services through the NHS long-term plan.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. It is a pity that we cannot go
back to the good old days where provisional business was also announced for the following sitting week, but I am pleased to see that the withdrawal agreement Bill is to be brought before the House, and I too very much look forward to seeing it.

May I also join in the tributes to Philippa Helme, and warmly congratulate the shadow Leader of the House on her warm and glowing tribute? Philippa Helme will be missed by all of us around the House.

May I also gently remind the Leader of the House that Monday’s business was on an English ratings Bill that was exclusively devolved? If she is in the business of trying to curtail the voting and speaking rights of Scottish Members of Parliament it is a bit rich her complaining we were not speaking on something that has absolutely nothing to do with us.

In advance of the withdrawal agreement Bill could we possibly have a debate about masochism, Mr Speaker, because it seems to me that the very definition of May-ite Conservatism is to do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result? It is a bewildering condition that involves delusion, deafness and self-flagellation—which they have obviously found a taste for—eventually leading to schism, paralysis and then political death. The idea that the Prime Minister will somehow get it through this time is almost like abandoning all sense of reason as Members are all rushing to tell her that they are not prepared to support her on this withdrawal agreement Bill. Her only hope is to get her comrades in the Labour party to abstain on all this, but I think I heard the shadow Secretary of State for Brexit saying today that Labour will not abstain and I hope that will be the case.

Another week on, and the men in grey underpants are still camped outside No. 10, trying to get the recalcitrant occupant to leave. Ultimatum after ultimatum is delivered, to no effect, and timetables are discussed, to no impact. I believe that another one is being discussed this morning. May we have a debate on enforced evictions and maybe see what this House can do to support the Brexit One?

Lastly, in advance of next week’s EU elections, could we perhaps have a debate on the productive and valuable relationship that we have with our European Union colleagues? In that debate, we on these Benches would make it abundantly clear that, in Scotland, we intend to stop this Government’s crazy Brexit and let the Scottish people determine their own future—and the only way to achieve that is to vote SNP next Thursday.

Andrea Leadsom: I am getting a bit worried about the hon. Gentleman: masochism and underpants in the same intervention! Anyway, I gather that he is up incredibly early on Thursday mornings to write his witty interventions. If he had been up early on Monday morning, he could have usefully used his time at the Liaison Committee, where I was appearing. It was very poorly attended, and he could have been there to talk about the effectiveness of what goes on in this place and made a useful contribution to how Select Committees contribute to exiting the EU.

He may not have had anything to say about business rates for Scotland, but he could have had something to say in the Adjournment debate of my lovely Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), on self-build housing. I am sure that his constituents in Scotland would be interested in the prospect of many more homes for them. There is a lot that goes on in this place—it is not all about what goes on in this Chamber, as we all know—so that was extremely disappointing.

The hon. Gentleman is pleased that we are getting on with the European Union withdrawal agreement Bill, and so am I. It is something that I have been calling for for a long time. It is vital that we give the Bill a Second Reading and that we actually leave the European Union. He also said that it was important to let the Scottish people decide. Well, the Scottish people did decide, in 2014, that they wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom. He was not listening to them then, and it is absolutely extraordinary that he stands up and argues for the Scottish people now when at every opportunity he is denying them the chance to remain part of the United Kingdom, which is good for us all.

Several hon. Members rose

Mr Speaker: Order. No fewer than 34 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye and, as per usual, I am keen to attempt to accommodate them. However, I remind the House that there is a statement to follow and that I have to regard to the importance of providing the Backbench Business Committee business as well. As a consequence of all that, there is a premium upon brevity—first to be exemplified, I am sure, by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—there will be speed if not brevity.

C. S. Lewis said:

“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking”.

We have heard again this week, and in the urgent question yesterday, that the tech companies’ claims about encryption and security are just so much soft soap. In this dystopian world of spying, Big Brother is watching us all. So will the Leader of the House arrange a debate so that we can consider how we can clamp down, bear down and if necessary close down those tech companies that are either callous, careless or crass?

Mr Speaker: Ah! Wonderful alliteration!

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is, as ever, succinct and to the point. As he is well aware, the Government’s White Paper on online harms will set out our plans to make this the best country in which to be as safe online as offline. We are encouraging companies to take forward a shared international approach to regulation and we are absolutely determined to resolve the issue of the ongoing harm being created through social media companies.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I echo everyone’s comments about Philippa Helme? She has been of enormous assistance to me since I became Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, as have her wonderful staff who support the Committee.

In the week we come back, will there be any time for Backbench business? I know it will be busy, but I hope there will be time on the 6th as we already have a couple of debates lined up for that day if time is allocated.
One would be on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire; the debate would come one week before the second anniversary of the fire. We must remember that 72 people died, over 70 were injured and over 300 were made homeless, and I think we must mark that occasion. The other debate would be on mortgage prisoners—people caught by the collapse of mortgage companies in the credit crunch—and their subsequent exploitation by what have become known as successor vulture funds. Those people are chained until death because of the way the vulture funds are exploiting them.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for Backbench time and I will always seek to accommodate it. I pay tribute again to the incredible bravery of the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy—an utterly appalling event, unrivalled in modern times. I shall certainly seek to give time for that debate.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I and those of my constituents who commute into London and rely on public transport are fed up with the unacceptably poor service from both South Western Railway and London Underground. Not only is the service unreliable, but when disruption occurs it takes practically all day for the service to get back to an acceptable standard, so both morning and evening commutes are affected. May we have a debate on how the Secretary of State for Transport and the Mayor of London can work more effectively together to get the service back up to scratch?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the frustration of commuters who cannot get to work; it is incredibly frustrating and happens far too frequently on some train services. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise her particular concerns about commuters in her constituency.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): My constituent Bhavani Esapathi contacted me following the Home Office’s rejection of a visa application. Bhavani has Crohn’s disease and needs critical care that is unavailable in India. She has lived and worked in the UK for almost 10 years. While Bhavani was in a coma after major surgery, she received a notice from the Home Office telling her that she should leave the country. May we have an urgent debate on the Government’s barbaric treatment of people?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious and worrying constituency case. I am sure that, were she to raise it directly with Home Office Ministers, they would respond. Obviously, they do take into account individual circumstances. I encourage her to raise the case directly.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Government rightly made funding available for the Law Commission to begin work on updating the UK’s surrogacy laws. Very shortly, the Law Commission will publish its initial proposals. I and other members of the all-party group on surrogacy will of course seek a debate on the proposals, either in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, but will the Government proactively consider providing Government time for us to debate that really important change to surrogacy law?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important subject. Surrogacy is a valuable way to provide would-be parents with the child they so long for. Of course, there are complex issues around making that work for both the surrogate and the new parents. I encourage him in the first instance to seek an Adjournment debate, so he can discuss the subject directly with Ministers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Back in 2010, the present Prime Minister told her party conference that she did not want the Tory party to be regarded as the nasty party. I do not know whether that miracle has happened, but could we have a debate on this Parliament not being a nasty Parliament? I have noticed some really personal attacks, usually on women MPs—of course, the Prime Minister is a woman. Can we have a debate on the standards we have in debate and how we respect each other during debates?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his 40 years in this place. How he can stand it I do not know. He obviously has lots of stamina. I also pay tribute to him for standing up for people treating each other with dignity and respect. He is absolutely right to do so. I encourage him to take part in the Westminster Hall debate on intimidation in public life on Tuesday 21 May. It is clear that whatever our political differences we must treat each other decently.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): In recent weeks and months, my constituency has tragically witnessed several suicides within the farming and rural community. Each case is tragic for the individual and devastating for the family and community left behind. My right hon. Friend has already mentioned that this is Mental Health Awareness Week—in fact, she has mentioned it twice—and that shows the commitment to this great cause. Can we have a debate on what can be done to tackle the causes of suicide in the farming community?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this worrying issue. Rates of depression and suicide are particularly high among farmers. The national suicide prevention strategy highlights the high risk of suicide among certain occupational groups, one of which is farmers. In October 2018, the Prime Minister announced our first suicide prevention Minister and recently she met the Farming Community Network to better understand the issues facing farmers. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend already has an Adjournment debate on this issue soon.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am wearing the mental health Scottish tartan in support of Mental Health Awareness Week.

I welcome next week’s debate on medical cannabis. I have two constituents, John and Laura, whose beautiful daughter, Blathnaitd, needs access to medical cannabis. After the Health Secretary told me at the Dispatch Box that he would look into their case, their correspondence department came back and said it was a matter for the Scottish Health Minister, which is not true—the licensing of medical cannabis is an issue for the UK Government.

Can the Leader of the House confirm that, when Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and say they will look into something, they should do it?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Ministers always seek to be very clear about what is a reserved and what is a devolved matter and to pay respect to that, as they utterly should do.
Occasionally, people have misunderstood or perhaps there is a different interpretation. I am certain that Ministers would always seek to correct the record if that were the case. He raises a specific point about his constituents and I am glad he will have the chance to raise it in the debate next week.

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** Can we have a debate to recognise the thousands of volunteers across the country currently fundraising for Christian Aid Week? In Moray, we have many events and collections going on and, last year, local volunteers raised £18,000 to contribute to the £8 million raised across the country. So will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the volunteers on what they are doing for Christian Aid Week in Moray and across the country?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the fantastic volunteers up and down the country fundraising for Christian Aid Week, particularly in his constituency. Christian Aid was founded in the aftermath of the second world war, when it worked to support refugees and rebuild communities. I would be delighted to support the Leader of the House in her desire to have a debate about the Council of Europe. The mechanism to do so is available and Ministers will consider the suggestion.

**Chris Butler:** I am grateful to the Leader of the House for her response. I have previously raised the issue in the House. Will she ensure that the mechanism is made available to Members to discuss the matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I agree with my hon. Friend that we should have a debate about the Council of Europe. When we leave the European Union, it will become an even more important forum, enabling us to share in some of the activities and initiatives that are taking place around Europe in areas of common interest. I will take the request away and look again at when we can provide the time.

**Iain C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** May we have an urgent statement from the Cabinet Office on election funding? There is an outstanding investigation by the National Crime Agency into Arron Banks in respect of Leave.EU’s overseas funding and his close ally, Nigel Farage, is now campaigning for the European elections. Will the Leader of the House support my call—do I have written to the Cabinet Office today—for the voluntary disclosure of donors by all political parties prior to the European elections, so that we know who is paying for the current campaigns?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a specific question. He has probably tabled written questions on the matter to the Cabinet Office. He could also of course seek an Adjournment debate to raise the issue directly with Ministers.

**Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con):** May I say how thrilled I am that we will have a debate on Monday on the prescribed use of cannabis in certain situations? It is sad that we have to have it, but I am pleased that it is happening.

I want to raise something with the Leader of the House that I have mentioned before, namely, the lack of accountability to the community for the decisions made by NHS trusts. She has said to me before, “You can get an Adjournment debate; you can go to Westminster Hall.” I have done that. Can we have a debate on the Floor of the House about NHS trust accountability and about when their decisions ignore local communities? My local NHS trust is doing that, spending £350 million on an old Victorian hospital when we need a new, purpose-built one.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** Some years ago, Dianne Watkinson created the Crowlees Hoppa walking bus. Last Friday, I joined Dianne, other volunteers and the children to walk to their lovely school. The scheme reduces traffic congestion and promotes exercise, so will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dianne and others and encourage other communities to follow suit?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating Dianne and all those who take part in the walking bus. As she says, it is a fantastic way for children to get exercise, to be community spirited, to see the world around them and, of course, it saves on environmental pollution. It is a profound good.
Andrea Leadsom: I genuinely wish that I could please my right hon. Friend by waving a magic wand and making his wishes come true. Unfortunately, as Leader of the House, all that I can suggest are ways of raising the matter in the House. I can certainly take away his request for a debate in Government time, but he will appreciate that he needs to keep raising the matter with the appropriate Ministers so that they can carefully consider his specific requests.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A recent DWP assessment found a constituent fit for work. He is terminally ill and relies on regular dialysis, but the assessor stopped his benefits based on his adequate rapport and the fact that he was able to keep eye contact. The DWP’s culture of disbelief is plunging many vulnerable constituents into poverty, so can we please have a debate on the impact that such assessments are having on disabled people and vulnerable constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious constituency issue. It does sound concerning that the assessment was potentially wrong. At the same time, she will appreciate that the Government spend £55 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—up by more than £10 billion since 2010 and a record high. Under this Government, the number of disabled people in work increased by more than 950,000 between 2013 and 2018, so the Government’s policy is to support those with disabilities both financially, so that they are able to lead normal lives, and by helping them to get into work to enable them to have a more fulfilling life. Nevertheless, she makes a serious point. If she wants to write to me after business questions, I can take it up directly with the Department.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the ongoing scandal of the abuse of freeholds? Many people, particularly in the north-west of England, buy new-build properties thinking that they are getting a traditional freehold only to discover many complex terms and conditions that often cost them a great deal of money. The Government have made great progress in the past year, but we need to consider legislating to give people protection in law.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the situation is scandalous. The Government have been looking into it, and he may well be aware that we are considering what more can be done on both a voluntary and a legislative basis.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Grimsby Institute’s level 3 enterprise and entrepreneurship group on its strong performance at the UK final of the Young Enterprise Start-up competition that was held in London yesterday? Our colleges play a critical role in delivering skills and qualifications, and they are at the forefront of the biggest reforms to technical education in a generation. When will we get a statement committing to increasing base rate funding for 16 to 19-year-olds by £1,000 so that colleges can meet the challenges that this place puts on them?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating Grimsby Institute on its excellent performance. It is important to encourage young people to consider starting their own businesses. She asks a specific question about a funding review, and I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate so that she can ask that question directly to Ministers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the whole House would like to thank the Leader of the House for announcing that the withdrawal agreement Bill—a major constitutional piece of legislation—will be debated in the first week after the recess. I understand that the Bill has 37 clauses and is already drafted, so could it be published so that Members can decide how to debate it and vote on it?

More importantly, will the Leader of the House explain why the Bill has been scheduled for that first week after recess, when we have the important D-day celebrations? On the political side, we have the Peterborough by-election and—I have twigged it—President Trump is also coming that week. Does the Leader of the House intend to invite President Trump to sit in the special Box in the Chamber reserved for important people so that he can see how British democracy works when discussing a major constitutional Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: May I say that the President of the United States will be very welcome in this place as far as I am concerned? My hon. Friend asks about the timing of the withdrawal agreement Bill. It is being brought forward in order for us to leave the European Union in line with the will of the 2016 referendum, and we need to get on with it. We certainly will publish the Bill in time for colleagues to be able to consider it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Many people lost money due to the collapse of London Capital & Finance, including my constituent Mr Fulcher, who lost thousands of pounds. The media have raised hopes of compensation, but may we have a Government statement so that we can have certainty about what will be done for the victims?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. I also have constituents who have lost money—it was scandalous—and I have heard from the Financial Conduct Authority about the steps that it is taking. We have Treasury questions on 21 May, when I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his specific question directly with Ministers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): First, may I add my congratulations to Grimsby Institute, which also serves my constituency?

Many of my constituents work at British Steel in Scunthorpe and there is much local media coverage about the uncertainty of their future employment. May I urge the Leader of the House to ask the Business Secretary to update—and, I hope, reassure—the House early next week?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on the performance of Grimsby Institute? He is a strong voice for his constituents.

This is a very concerning time for all those who feel nervous about the future of British Steel. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are doing everything they can to ensure that all those concerned have a good future. I am sure the Business Secretary will make a statement when he is able to do so.
Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): On Tuesday, the results of the great British transport competition, sponsored by the TaxPayers Alliance, were presented at Parliament by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). The winning entries included 22 sensible railway schemes. I have to say that not all railway schemes are sensible, but the country is in desperate need of a sensible future for our railways. Will the Leader of the House make time for a full debate in the Chamber about those proposals and other railway investment to provide for our long-term transport needs?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very closely involved—certainly for as long as I have been in Parliament—in looking at different rail projects. I absolutely admire his fortitude. He will be aware that the Government are investing the largest amount of money in our rail programme since the Victorian era. We are determined to improve the experience of passengers right across our rail network. I strongly suggest that he seek a Westminster Hall debate in the first instance because I have no doubt that those 22 rail projects will be of interest to many Members on both sides of the House.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Residents who live on a Bellway Homes-built estate in my constituency contacted me in April last year with concerns that the gas installation did not meet the safety regulations when the estate was built. We met Bellway on site in October, and it wrote to me the following week to say that the issue was with its lawyers and it would be back in touch. Despite my office and me chasing up Bellway many times, it has yet to respond. May we have an urgent debate on how we can hold house builders responsible to the people they sell houses to?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising that specific point in the Chamber, and I am sure that those listening will respond to him extremely urgently indeed. The safety of his constituents is a very serious issue, and I know that all hon. Members would want a very fast response.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Next week, on 26 May, Campie Primary School in Musselburgh will be 100 years old. Education is, of course, devolved, but I think that colleagues across the House agree to a debate on the strategic direction of its learning centres independently of the House agree to a debate on the strategic direction of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, so that any proposed closures can be averted?

Andrea Leadsom: The conflict in Rwanda was truly terrible, with appalling consequences for so many people, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise its anniversary. I certainly support the idea of a debate to look at how those in conflict situations can recover. There are far too many current conflicts and we should always seek to learn how we can better improve people’s lives so that they can survive and thrive again. I will certainly see what can be done.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be concerned to know that Marks & Spencer’s main store in Hull closed its doors on 4 May, 88 years after it opened. There are vacant units in our local railway station in the centre of Hull, and local MPs are asking for consideration to be given to Marks & Spencer opening a Simply Food outlet there, as has happened in many other stations up and down the land.

May we please have a debate, however, about the management of our train stations and whether they fulfill the needs of passengers and provide the necessary facilities? In Hull, the toilets are very smelly and signage is covered by masking tape. The current system is not working for passengers.

Andrea Leadsom: I am tempted to say that the M&S closure will be a disaster for all the grey underpants that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has talked about. They will obviously have to go elsewhere. It is a great shame and, after 88 years, a local tragedy—I can well understand that.

The hon. Lady raises an important point about the quality of the services available in train stations. All too often the toilets are closed late at night, when passengers may well want to use them, so I absolutely share her concern. She will be aware of the significant investment the Government are making in improving our rail infrastructure network, including the actual services available to passengers, but I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise her particular local concerns.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I hear that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, which runs driving test centres, may close a centre in Dunfermline in my constituency. That will cause great inconvenience to learner drivers and will come at a huge cost for driving schools and instructors. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the strategic direction of the DVSA so that any proposed closures can be averted?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that organisation is designed to be independent; it looks at where demand is, and manages its infrastructure and the availability of its learning centres independently of the Government. Nevertheless, I fully appreciate that
a local closure is always disappointing. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his particular concerns directly with Ministers.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** My riparian constituents living on Clink Street and all along the Thames are very concerned about a new pier being constructed on the north side of the river, mostly to serve as a new 1,500-person party boat. Will the Government provide time to debate how to transform tick-box consultation exercises for planning purposes into more meaningful engagement to ensure that everyone affected by developments has the right to have their concerns both heard and addressed?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can well understand the concerns of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents who would be adversely affected by such a development. He will be aware that there are strict planning rules that enable all those affected to have their say. Nevertheless, if he has particular concerns about how that works, he might want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss it directly.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** The housing crisis is hitting Battersea hard, and those most affected are the homeless families who have been placed by Wandsworth Council in temporary accommodation outside the borough. That means that they must make regular trips back to Battersea to carry out the school run twice a day, to attend GP appointments and for various other reasons, and yet the council expects those families to cover those additional costs. That is causing severe, deep financial hardship, so may we have a debate on the issue in Government time?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am genuinely sorry to hear about the problems those constituents who are being placed outside the borough are having. Obviously, the key point is that we do not want to see anybody homeless, so it is vital that people are enabled to have a roof over their head. The Government are putting billions more into affordable housing and allowing councils to borrow to build more homes, deliberately to try to address the problem of getting the right number of homes in the right places. The hon. Lady talks about a specific constituency issue, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise it directly with Ministers.

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** I have been applying for some time, without success, for a debate on transport issues in Cheshire as we urgently need to discuss some of the things that are occurring. If my constituents want to cross the River Mersey, they get ripped off whichever way they go. If they go to the Mersey Gateway, they have to pay an exorbitant fee, whereas use is free for residents of Halton. If they go through the Mersey tunnels, they find that fees have increased by 50% while people who live in Merseyside are getting a discount. This is a postcode lottery; it is completely unfair and we need to discuss it urgently.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can quite imagine that the situation is infuriating the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

**Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** May we have a statement from a Treasury Minister about how the Financial Conduct Authority is dragging its feet over contingent charging by independent financial advisers? We need urgent action to protect pension scheme members and clamp down on these pension sharks.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have sought, through various measures, to clamp down on pension sharks so that it is much easier for those seeking a new pension provider to get the advice that they need. We have Treasury questions on Tuesday 21 May, when I encourage him to raise his issue directly.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** The Older People’s Commissioner for Wales has written to me to raise her deep concern about the impact of the Government’s changes to pension credit and housing benefit in respect of the eligibility of mixed-age couples, with the worry being that they will have to claim universal credit until both of them reach pension age. On her estimates, that could lead to some households being at least £600 a month worse off. May we therefore find time for a debate and to review the eligibility of mixed-age couples so that they are not left worse off because of Government changes?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of which I am not personally aware. He will appreciate that the Government have sought to learn from every issue raised in this Chamber in order to improve universal credit, so that a new system that replaces something that used to trap people on benefits and leave some people facing an effective tax rate of 90% now works better for people, be they in work or pensioners. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on this specific issue so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Officials of the recognised Luhansk people’s republic in eastern Ukraine have ordered Baptist Union churches to halt their public worship or risk punishment. Last year, LPR authorities drafted a law requiring all churches to re-register and all Protestant churches as illegal and have cracked down on meetings of these groups. Therefore, officials now regard Protestant communities. Therefore, officials now regard all Protestant churches as illegal and have cracked down on meetings of these groups. Will the Leader of the House agree to arrange a statement or debate on this issue?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this worrying situation. He is a strong voice for the freedom of religious belief, and he will be aware that the Government strongly promote the right to religious freedom around the world. I encourage him to raise this issue directly with Foreign Office Ministers.
Probation Reform

12.33 pm
The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
(Mr David Gauke): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Government’s response to the “Strengthening Probation, Building Confidence” consultation. Earlier today, I laid this Government response for consideration by both Houses. The response sets out our proposals for the future of the probation service. Across England and Wales, the probation service has more than a quarter of a million people under its supervision at any one time. An effective service is key to protecting the public, punishing those who have broken the law and reducing reoffending. I pay tribute to the hard work and professionalism of staff in both our national probation service and in the community rehabilitation companies who deliver this vital work.

The Transforming Rehabilitation reforms from 2014 aimed to encourage innovation and more modern ways of working. We introduced a payment-by-results system, creating incentives for providers to achieve reductions in reoffending; and we extended statutory supervision and resettlement to all offenders released from prison, supporting an extra 40,000 offenders for the first time. Since those reforms, we have seen a reduction in reoffending and other positive developments. However, there are challenges in the system. The changes I am setting out today are designed to make the system work as effectively as possible and meet our aims of a probation system that commands the confidence of the courts and the public.

Last summer, we took action to stabilise current delivery, and as a result, there are now about 500 additional staff in place to focus on resettlement services for offenders. At the same time, we announced a consultation on our plans for the future. I am grateful to the individuals and organisations who engaged and provided valuable feedback. We have reflected carefully and considered how to most effectively use the innovation and expertise of both the private and public sector to continue to drive down reoffending. I am today setting out plans that will see responsibility for the management of all offenders transferred to the national probation service. These arrangements are different from those set out for England in the consultation last summer. However, I believe that bringing responsibility for the delivery of all offender management within the NPS will remove some of the complexities that have caused challenges in the current model of delivery and make it more likely that an offender will have continuity of supervision throughout their sentence, while strengthening processes for managing risk. Alongside those changes, we will develop a more clearly defined role for the private and voluntary sector in delivering core interventions to offenders and securing innovation in the provision of those services.

Each NPS region will continue to have a private or voluntary sector partner—an innovation partner—directly responsible for providing unpaid work and accredited programmes. The NPS will be expressly required to buy all programmes from the private and voluntary sector, spending up to an estimated £280 million a year. Contracts will be designed flexibly, so that innovative approaches that show results can be quickly identified and spread across the wider system.

Those interventions, such as unpaid work, accredited programmes, and resettlement and rehabilitative services are central to delivering the sentences of the courts. Subject to market engagement, I look ahead to launching procurement for those services later in the year with competitions for unpaid work and accredited programmes.

We want to make sure that services are responsive to local needs, and for resettlement and rehabilitative services we will create a national dynamic framework. It will be accessible to all providers, including specialist smaller scale and voluntary sector providers with the expertise to support the most complex offenders back into society. That direct relationship will create a greater role for providers in delivering probation services and ensure that innovation can be identified and replicated across the system effectively. I am confident that this model, based on the arrangements we consulted on in Wales, offers the most sustainable approach for probation and is the best option to build on the positive changes made under transforming rehabilitation, strengthen the system and sentencers’ confidence in it, and continue to break the cycle of reoffending. We have no intention of reverting to the former probation trust model.

Since the consultation we have established a director general post in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, responsible for overseeing probation delivery, and we will appoint probation directors across each new probation region. Probation works best when local partners work together, and those directors will be accountable for the quality, delivery and commissioning of services in each area, alongside building stronger relationships with local partners to ensure real joint working, including through co-commissioning opportunities, where possible.

Alongside those organisational changes in the NPS, we will overhaul NPS capability in commissioning and innovation, and deploy cutting-edge technology. CRCs have taken some steps to demonstrate how digital tools can improve practice. We will transform the use of technology in probation, investing in a digital and data strategy that will replace all our core systems and better utilise data to inform professional judgment. We will complement that with a new targeted innovation fund. We will ring-fence an initial £20 million a year in a regional outcome fund to attract match funding from other Departments or commissioning bodies, including social finance providers and social impact bonds. The fund will be reserved for innovative, cross-cutting approaches and will enable us to test proof of concept services before scaling them up.

I want to go further than what was set out in the consultation: when parliamentary time allows, we will look to introduce legislation to implement a statutory professional regulatory framework that puts probation on a par with teaching or social work. It will set ethical and training standards for different roles, to recognise the skills and expertise of probation staff and to support their ongoing professional development and expertise in providing a critical public service.

The changes I have set out will mean that in future it will be easier to respond to the changing profiles of offenders and to drive improvements across the probation system. We will continue to leverage the innovation of the private and voluntary sector and to ensure that probation is working with partners across the criminal justice system to reduce reoffending. It is essential that we take the time to get the changes right. We have put in
place arrangements to allow us to extend CRC contracts to ensure that we have the necessary time to get the transition to the new system right. We intend to use the arrangements to end contracts in spring 2021. My officials will now engage with prospective providers and wider stakeholders and finalise our proposals ahead of seeking to launch procurement exercises later this year.

The changes I have outlined will help to deliver a stronger, more stable probation system that will reduce reoffending, support victims of crime and keep the public safe and that will merit the confidence of the courts and the public. I commend this statement to the House.

12.41 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Government have been forced to face reality and accept that their probation model is irredeemably broken; unfortunately, though, this U-turn comes only after they have put public safety at risk and squandered hundreds of millions of pounds trying to shore up failing private probation firms. The Opposition are clear that today’s announcement is a necessary first step in cleaning up the probation mess, but the question is whether it goes far enough.

Have the Conservatives really learned the lesson about the limitations of the role of the private sector in delivering probation? The Tories did not want to make this U-turn and had been trying desperately to re-tender private probation contracts; in fact, the House may remember that that was the Secretary of State’s big probation announcement last summer. Was it the flood of recent scathing reports from experts such as the chief inspector and the excellent work of the Public Accounts Committee and the Justice Committee that forced the Government’s hand? Or was it the collapse of Working Links, one of the largest private probation providers in the country, and the severe financial difficulties faced by another, Interserve? This is an important matter, because I am concerned that if lessons have not been learned, the changes announced today could be a smokescreen to give failing outsourcing giants—the likes of G4S and Sodexo—a route back into probation.

Labour is clear that there is an important role for the voluntary sector and small social enterprises in a future justice system. Voluntary sector organisations have held much of the justice system together in the face of Government cuts. We have heard promises before from the Secretary of State’s Government that the voluntary sector will play a major role, only for that to have been an excuse for big corporations to profit from probation, so what is the overall proportion of all probation budgets that the Secretary of State expects to be delivered by the private sector in future? A figure of £280 million has been suggested; what proportion of that will go to the voluntary sector? Each probation area will be allocated a private company or voluntary body; will private companies be able to act in more than one probation area—which would favour outsourcing giants—or will they be specific local social enterprises? Will any of the major companies that have failed in probation be able to access the contracts?

On oversight and accountability, does the Secretary of State have concerns that the 11 probation areas will remain too distant from local communities? How will they interact with local criminal justice boards and health and policing services?

Privatisation failed to reduce reoffending, with a 22% overall increase in the average number of offences per reoffender. Separate figures suggest that serious further offences such as murder and rape soared by 50%. What is the Secretary of State’s target for reducing reoffending under the new model?

Labour has long called for the Conservatives to drop their dangerous obsession with running probation for profit, but we have also been outlining the alternative, with the well-respected Lord Ramsbotham overseeing Labour’s review of what a publicly-owned probation service would look like under a Labour Government. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the vision outlined in Lord Ramsbotham’s important report?

The new probation model will start from spring 2021. Given the likelihood of a change of Government before then, will the Secretary of State commit today to setting up a special committee to reach a broad consensus on probation reforms? That would rule out the need for a future Labour Government to make further changes.

As a result of chaotic privatisation, many experienced staff left. What action will the Secretary of State take to rehire experienced former probation staff?

In conclusion, the changes announced today should just be a start. The Government must demonstrate a commitment to the true function of probation, properly invest in it and ensure that it can once again be the award-winning public service that it was before the disastrous Conservative privatisation.

Mr Gauke: To be fair, by the hon. Gentleman’s standards that was quite a warm welcome for this policy announcement. I thank him for that.

Let me pick up some of the points he made. He talked about the costs and about the squandering of vast sums of money; the House should be aware that we have spent considerably less with the community rehabilitation companies than was anticipated when the business plan for the transforming rehabilitation programme was put together. The issue is not the squandering of billions of pounds; it is about how we improve the service, and that is the intention behind my announcement.

On returning to the past, which was a sort of theme in the hon. Gentleman’s comments, we do not want to do that. I do not think that simply to return to the days of 35 probation trusts is the right course of action. There are things that we can learn from what was done well with them, as well as what was not done so well, just as we can learn from what has happened over the past four years or so, post the transforming rehabilitation programme.

On the £280 million and how it will be spent, as I said there will be regional directors for each of the 11 regions, and they will make decisions based on commercial considerations in terms of the nature of the bids. I am keen to do more to ensure that the voluntary sector can get in and play an important role.

I want to encourage work at a devolved level. For example, I want to do everything that we can to ensure that police and crime commissioners can play an active role.

We are already recruiting staff. Probation has an absolutely key role to play in how we tackle crime and reduce reoffending, and I want to make sure that it is properly resourced.
Mr Gauke: Clearly, there have been difficulties about the payment-by-results model in this context, and Dame Glenys Stacey has been very clear about that. She described herself as being delighted by the announcement today. I am delighted that she is delighted.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The attempt to bring in transforming rehabilitation failed partly because it failed to take into account and wait for the end of the pilots at Doncaster and Peterborough prisons. Does the Secretary of State agree that that has been part of the failure? Will he tell me what effect his reforms will have on those who want to introduce new services, such as a much better rehabilitation process through paid work?

Mr Gauke: With regard to previous experience, there is always a balance to be struck between trying to deliver something in good time and waiting to see all the evidence emerge. On where we are now, we should move to a different model. We will lead with Wales, and by the end of this year, we should have moved to a unified model. England will follow in 2021. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of work. He knows that that is a key issue for me in terms of rehabilitation. Both paid and unpaid work have important roles to play. I do want to encourage innovation; I want to make sure that, in such areas, we have innovation and a diversity of suppliers who can play a role in ensuring that we try new things, learn from experiences and get things improving.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This failed experiment was set to cost the taxpayer £467 million because of the early termination of contracts at the end of next year. It would be helpful to know what the total bill will be. My biggest concern as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is that the Secretary of State has just laid out that there will be major local procurement processes over the next two years. It seems like a long time now, but that time will go very fast. How will he make sure that that procurement is done thoughtfully and sensitively and really reaches those small voluntary groups that were so cut out of the previous system?

Mr Gauke: First, let me make the point about costs. I come back to the point that I made earlier, which is that our expenditure with community rehabilitation companies has been considerably lower than had been forecast—£1.4 billion lower. That takes into account the £467 million to which the hon. Lady referred, which was there to ensure that we had operational stability. As we move on to the new system, she is right to say that 2021 will soon be upon us. We do need to focus very heavily on ensuring that procurement works well, that we make use of the voluntary sector and that there is proper competition so that those who can contribute to this process can do so properly, and we are very much focused on that.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to have done what he has done. There is no doubt that, in many cases, the CRC contract did not achieve the intended aims. I was glad to hear that he still envisages a significant role for the voluntary sector and even, in some cases, for the private sector. I hope that he can assure us that the basic principle of the organisation that is employed to engage in rehabilitation, which is what we so sorely lacked under the previous regime,
is fulfilled and that evidence is garnered of whether a particular voluntary or private operator is producing results and that, where they are, that model is replicated.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am keen to ensure that we have the innovation that we need, and I have talked about the innovation fund. It is very important that we are led by the data and that where good practice is identified it is disseminated so that it can be taken up elsewhere in the system. That is why it is helpful to have a diversity of supply. Under the old probation trust system, there was a reluctance on the part of many probation trusts to make use of the voluntary and private sectors. We do not want to go back to such a system. None the less, a unified model for offender management is a sensible way forward.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Despite the Secretary of State’s characteristically emollient and reasonable tone, the announcement he has made today covers up one of the most catastrophic pieces of public policy and waste of public money that we have seen in many a long year. It has let down communities that suffer from crime; it has let down victims of crime; and it has let down those people who commit crimes who have a right to try at least to change their ways. Will the Minister say something about the Secretary of State—one of his predecessors—who actually thought that this would work and talk to us about ministerial accountability, because there seems to be absolutely none of it left in this flailing Government?

Mr Gauke: I shall try to be emollient again. The fact is that the reoffending rate has fallen since Transforming Rehabilitation was brought in. There are areas of very good practice within the private sector. A number of parliamentary colleagues have highlighted good practice in their own areas. That tends to be more in the accredited programmes and in the unpaid work areas than in offender management. The fact that we have a larger number of programmes and interventions programme, can the Minister give me some assurances that he will prioritise voluntary sector organisations, as they provide the best results when it comes to issues such as housing and substance abuse, and that he will not award these contracts to private organisations that exist just to make a profit and deliver services that are not as good?

Mr Gauke: We will certainly want to prioritise organisations that deliver the best results; that is the key task. As the hon. Gentleman says, it is often the smaller voluntary services that are able to do that. At this point, it is not a question of providing specific targets as such. We want to ensure that the organisations that are best placed to deliver high-quality services—often from the voluntary sector—are in a strong position to be able to do that work.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am a member of the Criminal Bar Association.

This is a good example of policy based on ideology, as opposed to policy based on evidence and, frankly, good sound common sense. Probation officers need to be qualified, properly paid, trained and respected because of the important work they do. They advise judges in the sentencing process, in which they play a critical part. They also play a critical part in rehabilitation, and of course they keep people safe, including offenders. Will the Secretary of State please assure us that he will ensure that his Department is run not on ideological grounds, but on evidence-based grounds? To that end, will he also assure us that this new system, which I welcome, will not overly rely on digitisation alone, but will remember that we need people to deal with what is basically a people service?

Mr Gauke: I thank the right hon. Lady for welcoming the reforms. She asks whether I can guarantee that the Ministry of Justice will not be run along ideological lines but when I look across the Chamber, I am really not sure that I can provide that guarantee; it may be up to the electorate. The right hon. Lady made a crucial point about the value of probation officers. We should do everything we can to value their work. As I mentioned in my statement, we intend to bring forward a statutory professional regulatory framework, part of which is about ensuring that the status of probation officers is properly valued because they have a crucial role in reducing crime.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the news that the Government have finally recognised what I and many others have been telling them for too long—that their decision to part privatised the probation service has failed. We know from reports that this outsourcing error has wasted nearly half a billion pounds, but can the Secretary of State tell me what assessment he has made of the human cost of privatisation, including those badly injured or even killed by people under probation supervision, such as my constituent Jacqueline Wileman?

Mr Gauke: Every individual case such as the one mentioned by the hon. Lady is a tragedy. We want to do everything we can to ensure that such cases are kept to a minimum, but there will always be individual decisions made by probation officers in the NPS or CRCs, and such tragedies can indeed occur. My focus is on ensuring...
that we have a sustainable system for the future, and what I have outlined to the House today provides exactly that.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I listened carefully to what the Minister said about the failed privatisation of the probation service and the waste of money, but I wondered if he could help me with something that I am intrigued about. Would he tell us what arrangements are being put in place to supervise the serial offender in the Cabinet who causes criminal damage in every Department that he is sent to? Is he being considered for early release?

**Mr Gauke:** I can see that the hon. Lady has been working hard on her question. In 2014, the probation system was by no means perfect. There was a need for more innovation, and to ensure that we dealt with some of the inefficiencies in the system. Five years on, there are elements of those reforms where we can see real benefits, but I accept that there are also elements that have not worked as intended. It is right that we look at reforming those elements and that we make changes where we need to, and that is precisely what I have done.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab) rose—

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clive Efford.

**Clive Efford:** Good choice, Mr Speaker.

This situation is a disgrace: reoffending rates are up 22%; there has been a 47% increase in offenders who have been recalled to prison for breaching their licence; the service is rated inadequate in 80% of areas; and tens of thousands of offenders are being monitored by phone. Dame Glenys Stacey calls the whole thing “irredeemably flawed”. When are we going to know the impact that the Secretary of State for Transport has had on crime levels, which all our constituents are concerned about? This increase in crime, which he must have caused through this flawed probation service, is something that only a mafia don could be proud of. When are we going to assess his impact on crime?

**Mr Gauke:** To be candid, one of the problems that we have faced with the current system is that the case load of low and medium-risk offenders has been significantly lower than was anticipated when the system was set up. As a consequence, the CRCs have not had the work that they expected. We have therefore been in something of a vicious circle; as there has been less work, the CRCs have been under financial strain and have invested less, and that is why in some cases the service has not been what we need it to be. That is the context of this situation.

**Nick Smith:** I have had terrible problems getting hold of local probation service data in Blaenau Gwent, so I hope the Secretary of State’s promise about improving digital management comes to something. I will certainly be watching out for that in the future. May I ask him whether a recreated or new probation model will be based on county boundaries, which would be much better than it being based on larger regions, as is the case at present? Probation services need to be closer to employers, local prisons and local police services.

**Mr Gauke:** We are working on the basis of 11 regions, and one of those regions—Wales—is a nation. I recognise that much could be done to ensure that the system is as localised as possible. I have been talking to police and crime commissioners to see if there is more that could be done that is relevant at their level. To the extent that we can devolve below those regions in an effective and efficient way, I would certainly be keen to do so.
Backbench Business

**Definition of Islamophobia**

1.8 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate and the Government for providing time for us to discuss this issue today.

On 15 March, a gunman walked into the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand and opened fire. During his killing spree there and at the Linwood Islamic Centre, 51 people were slaughtered in their place of worship for no reason other than that their killer had decided that their faith meant that they deserved to die.

Hatred against Muslims does not begin with the sound of gunfire breaking through the peaceful calm of a place of prayer. It begins with simple prejudice that can go unchecked and unchallenged in our schools, workplaces and communities. It is amplified on the pages of national newspapers. It is legitimised by political leaders who use Muslims as punchlines and bigotry as a vote winner. Just over 20 years ago, the Rannymeade Trust published its seminal report, “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All”. That it felt compelled to publish a follow-up 20 years later entitled “Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All” reflects our collective failure to listen, learn and lead.

The all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, which I am proud to lead with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), is determined to rise to this challenge. That is why we produced a ground-breaking report proposing a working definition of “Islamophobia” entitled “Islamophobia Defined”. We entered into this with an open mind about whether “Islamophobia” was the correct term. It was clear from the evidence we gathered, including powerful testimony from victims, that the word “Islamophobia” is widely used by Muslim communities, that it is considered to be useful and that what we are up against goes much wider than anti-Muslim hatred—it is structural, often unconscious bias. We argue:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

It is true that Islam is a religion—a set of beliefs and ideas—and that Muslims are a set of believers from many races. But racism is a social construct. As Dr Omar Khan of the Rannymeade Trust has said, “Defining Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism properly locates the issue as one in which groups of people are ascribed negative cultural and racial attributes which can lead to a wide range of experiences, either as unconscious bias, prejudice, direct or indirect discrimination, structural inequality or hate incidents.”

Of course, many Muslims do belong to an ethnic minority in the United Kingdom, and even those who do not—white converts, for example—experience a form of racism. As Tell MAMA, an organisation that does excellent work in recording hate crime against Muslims, told us, “Any definition must consider how racialisation of Muslim identity means, for example, that white converts are verbally abused with racial epithets like ‘P*ki’.”

Alongside our definition, we produced a series of examples, inspired by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, to help people to understand how Islamophobia manifests itself. These are outlined clearly in our report. They include calling for, aiding, instigating or justifying the killing or harming of Muslims in the name of a racist or fascist ideology or an extremist view of religion; the tropes that Muslims suffer from entryism in politics, accusing Muslims of being more loyal to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide than to their own nations; and applying double standards not applied to any other group in society.

But perhaps the best examples are those we published of real acts of Islamophobia within our own country: the attempted murder of a Muslim woman and her 12-year-old daughter as “revenge” for the Parsons Green terror attack; the torture of a Muslim convert by two women in Guisborough while they shouted, “We don’t like Muslims over here,” and worse; the Muslim mother attacked for wearing a hijab on the way to collect her children from primary school in London; the so-called “punish a Muslim day” letters sent to Muslim institutions and prominent Muslim figures; the racists in Northern Ireland who left a pig’s head on the door of a mosque they had graffitied; charging motorists £1,000 more to insure their car if their name is Mohammed; conscious and unconscious bias against Muslims in the employment market, which was identified by the Social Mobility Commission; the Islamophobic abuse hurled at people who are not even Muslim because their abusers could not tell the difference between, for example, a Sikh wearing a turban and a Muslim man; and the men who tied bacon to the door handles of a mosque in Bristol.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for all his hard work and leadership on this issue. As we all know, hate crime against our Muslim community has risen by almost 100% since the Brexit referendum. In my constituency, which has the biggest Muslim population of any constituency in Britain, nearly 90% of my constituents have experienced Islamophobia or know someone who has. That includes bottles thrown at them.
alcohol thrown at them, and people screamed at for having the temerity to wear a hijab. Surely we need a
better definition of Islamophobia if we are to prosecute
Islamophobia and to clamp down on its enablers in the
British media.

Wes Streeting: My right hon. Friend is absolutely
correct. He is respected in this place for his deep knowledge
of extremism issues, which is why we invited him to
give evidence to our inquiry. The law already covers
discrimination based on race and religion, but what we
are dealing with is not just a challenge of changing laws;
it is a challenge of changing hearts and minds, changing
the everyday lived experiences of people in our community,
and helping people to recognise and understand the
challenge.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is
making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, if we
are to tackle Islamophobia and other hate crime, we
must ensure that the social media companies take their
responsibility seriously? Only this week, I reported to
Facebook this comment by somebody following the
report of a large Muslim gathering: “A pig’s head and a
dozen packs of bacon should do it.” Facebook replied
very quickly, saying that it did not contravene its community
standards. If that does not contravene them, what does?
I hope that Facebook is listening today and will reflect
on this. Does my hon. Friend agree that the social
media companies, and the written media, need to do
much more?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for
that intervention. I raised this with Facebook very
recently during a visit to its headquarters in Silicon
Valley with the all-party parliamentary group on the
fourth industrial revolution. It must be taken seriously.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon.
Friend for his work on this issue and indeed to the
right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who
has championed it over a number of years. The Government
are consulting on their online harms White Paper. In my
opinion, it is not anywhere near robust enough on
online hate or on the various levels of impact that social
media has across society. He made a point about how
we change hearts and minds. Does he agree that social
media companies can play a part in that? Rather than
allowing the jokes, the hatred and the assumptions about
people’s race and religion to be posted, they could be
far more robust not just in dealing with complaints but
in their facility to take these images down. They often
do not do that for days, as in the case of the Christchurch
mosque killings; it took over a day to remove those images
from YouTube because it was reviewing the content.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree. I hope that that point
will be taken up by Ministers as they think about this
issue carefully in the course of their consultation.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We also
know that an excessive level of hatred and abuse is piled
on to black and minority ethnic public figures on Facebook,
including the Mayor of London, who receives a torrent
of Islamophobic abuse on virtually all his pronouncements.
I reinforce the point that the social media companies
have to be a critical part of this. We have to change the
law, but all the partners have to play a part in making it work.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for
making that powerful point. The Mayor of London and
my right hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham
(Mr Lammy) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington
(Ms Abbott) are among the many people in public life
who are targeted because of racism—racism, pure and
simple. It has a gendered aspect and a religious aspect,
and it has to be recognised and tackled. Social media
companies tell us they have the tools in place, but they
are clearly not using them, and that is partly because
they do not understand the prejudice that is as plain as
the nose on their face.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon.
Friend for the work he has done on this issue. Does he
agree that we need clarity? The definition is essential.
We cannot have different degrees of racism; something
is either racist or not. If we start to question the fine
detail of a clear, concise definition of Islamophobia, we
open the door for companies like the social media
platforms to question what is and is not Islamophobic,
and the Government need to be much clearer and
firmer on this.

Wes Streeting: Precisely. Let me make some progress
on that point.

We toured the length and breadth of the country,
engaging in extensive consultation with Muslim
communities, academics, lawyers, police officers, public
services, civil society leaders and politicians. That is why
our definition already has widespread backing from
more than 750 British Muslim organisations—including
the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Women’s
Network and British Muslims for Secular Democracy—and
from the First Minister of Scotland, the Mayor of
London, local authorities across the country and the
chair of the Government’s own working group on anti-
Muslim hatred.

It is particularly disappointing to hear a noisy chorus
of vocal opposition from many of the usual suspects,
who are making arguments in bad faith that accuse us
of trying to use the term “Islamophobia” to shut down
criticism of Islam and introduce blasphemy laws by the
back door. In fact, our report makes it crystal clear that
our definition does not preclude criticism of Islam or
Islamic theology. I am not Muslim. I do not believe that
the Holy Koran is the received word of God or that the
Prophet Mohammed was the seal of the prophets who I
recognise from my Bible, who Jews would recognise
from their Torah or who many people would fail to
recognise at all because they think religious books
belong in the fiction section of the local library. God, if
we believe in such a thing, does not need protection
from criticism. Ideas must always be subjected to debate
and challenge.

The motivations of some of our critics are particularly
exposed when they accuse us of pushing a definition
written for us by others, including Muslim Engagement
and Development and Cage—two organisations that
have pointedly refused to support our definition. I would
have thought it obvious by now that the right hon.
Member for Broxtowe and I do not take kindly to being
told what to do by anyone, let alone organisations with
which we have serious disagreements.
Let me turn to some of the other concerns that have been expressed in good faith and reply in kind. Our definition does not cover sectarianism, which extends from the abuse levelled at our Home Secretary on social media by other Muslims calling him a “coconut”, through to the treatment of the Ahmadiyya community, whom we are proud to engage through the work of our APPG. We recognise that sectarianism is a serious problem that extends beyond one religion and is worthy of separate consideration and action, just as the persecution of so-called non-believers or ex-believers is something we must consider further and separately.

Our definition does not prevent security and law enforcement agencies from recognising and fighting the threat posed to this country and other democracies by those with a warped view of Islam who carry out acts of violence and terrorism. Our definition does not prevent academics from pointing out the religious motivation behind, say, the sieges on Constantinople or the caliphate’s imposition of discriminatory taxes on Jews and Christians, just as we would discuss the role of Christianity in the crusades. Our definition does not prevent critical discussion about the conflict that can arise between conservative religious teaching and more liberal attitudes to issues such as human sexuality, the role of women, food laws, abortion and assisted dying.

While our definition cannot prevent false-flag accusations of Islamophobia to shut down reasonable debate and discussion, it does not enable such accusations. In fact, it makes it easier to deal with such behaviour. Context is everything. Our definition provides a framework for helping organisations to assess, understand and tackle real hatred, prejudice and discrimination.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an outstanding contribution to this very important discussion in this country. He raises the difficulty of terrorism, and he could also raise the very difficult issue of sexual grooming. Does he deplore and condemn the way in which this most minority of sinners who exist in every single ethnic group on the planet is being extrapolated to condemn an entire community? That is precisely what we are trying to get to grips with, through this important definition, to challenge those who take a terrible act by a small group of people and extend it to an entire ethnic group.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree; that is exactly what we are trying to achieve. The story that is not written is how, through our APPG on British Muslims in Redbridge. The Muslims who are involved in that have done a fantastic job. Does he agree that inter-faith dialogue is the essence of dealing with these problems?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. As shown by the discussion on “Newsnight” last night between myself and a respected imam from Leicester, we can reconcile our way through some of these challenges, difficulties and tensions with mutual respect, proper public discourse and dialogue. Those of us who are on the receiving end of prejudice of one kind or another know exactly what it feels like, and we have a particular responsibility to stand alongside others who experience prejudice. That is why I am proud to lead the APPG on British Muslims as a non-Muslim and the APPG on British Jews as a non-Jew. It is not just the responsibility of Muslims to tackle Islamophobia; it is a challenge for us all.

Let me conclude with some personal observations. I have watched, with some amazement and even greater despair, the Conservative party making exactly the same mistakes over Islamophobia as my party has with antisemitism—the same miserable, inexcusable pattern of dismissal, denial and delegitimisation of serious concerns raised by prominent Muslims about racism within their ranks. My friend Baroness Warsi has stood as a brave lone voice, challenging discrimination in her party. As we recoil in horror at the deafening silence of decent people in the Conservative party about racism within their ranks, I respectfully say to some quarters of my own party: that is the same silence you demand of me on antisemitism, and it is one you will never receive.

The Prime Minister could have followed the lead of the Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, in backing this definition and left a powerful legacy to detoxify her party and improve the lives of Muslims across the country. Instead, with a remarkable lack of self-awareness and humility, the party that has so spectacularly failed British Muslims now intends to produce its own description. The party’s abject failure to understand and tackle Islamophobia within its own ranks means that it has neither the wisdom nor the credibility to do so.

Given that, just over a year ago, Ministers denied that there was a need for any definition at all, I suppose we might consider this latest development some sign of progress. But it is too slow; it is insufficient; and it will not be tolerated. British Muslims deserve better than this. As the Runnymede Trust said last year, Islamophobia remains, shamefully, a challenge for us all. It is one that we must now meet.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will not impose a time limit, but if we work to 10-minute speeches, or thereabouts, everybody will get in.

1.29 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I will be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for whom, as he knows, I have the highest regard; we have worked on many things over some time. I disagreed with him today, however, and the nature of a relationship—indeed, I would like to say friendship—is that we can do so with integrity. I hope he will agree that my...
disagreement is based on good faith—those were the words that he used—rather than anything else, and it is informed by conversations that I have had with others, whom I shall quote in a moment.

It is, of course, axiomatic that prejudice and bigotry levelled at a particular group on the basis of their race, religion or origin is wholly unacceptable, and those who apologise or are apologists for that have no place in this House. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) —he is another friend of mine, in the personal rather than the parliamentary sense—knows of my support for him when, quite rightly, boldly and bravely, raised the issue of Windrush. The Government were undoubtedly in the wrong; he was in the right; and his star rose as a result. But he did not do it for that reason; he did it in the cause of justice, and once again I congratulate him on so doing.

Let me start with a quotation that will not be to the taste of all Members:

“Most Muslims in this country see the preoccupation with Islamophobia, which is increasingly peddled by guilt-ridden white liberals and self-appointed Muslim campaigners, as far from being in their interests, an initiative that is likely to separate, segregate and stigmatise them and their families.”

That quote comes from a Muslim scholar, Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq, with whom I had breakfast this morning. He is an example of how a first-generation immigrant, a practising and devout Muslim and, like many Muslims, a proud British patriot—the hon. Member for Ilford North, are undoubtedly cause for alarm and require action. There being no doubt about that, the argument is about whether this definition of Islamophobia is helpful or not. This debate is not about the intent or our shared commitment to dealing with hatred and prejudice, or about our determination to stand by the people the hon. Lady describes; it is about whether this initiative, APPG report and definition move things on or not. There are differing opinions about that, and they are not all articulate, unhelpful or deliberately obstructive. Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged in his speech, such opinions are exercised in good faith. People may, of course, have tangential views and not act in good faith—he drew attention to that as well—but not all criticism of this is based on bias. Indeed, some criticisms, such as that offered by Mohammed Abdel-Haq, are based on a fear of separation, segregation and stigmatisation.

Let me develop the argument a little further. The report essentially identifies Islamophobia as an exercise in racism, which presumes that the Muslim peoples of this country, or any country, are a race. Given that Islam is a religion, that proposition is of itself contentious, and has been described as such by some critics of the report. People who ascribe to that religion come from all kinds of places, are all kinds of colours and creeds, and adopt all kinds of different practices. Rather like Christians, some take a more fundamentalist view of their faith than others. To describe them as a race is, of itself, a bold, and some would argue contentious, view, yet that is what the report does by identifying Islamophobia as a matter of anti-racism.

My third point—for those who are counting, Mr Deputy Speaker—is that many existing laws deal with these things. When I was the Security Minister, I worked with Mark Rowley in the Home Office on counter-terrorism matters, so I know him well. The argument that he made on the BBC this morning is that existing legislative arrangements on incitement to hatred, discrimination and a panoply of other measures allow the police, if they so choose, to pursue people who behave in a way that is unacceptable and, much more seriously, illegal—there is a perfectly proper argument that the police do not do that enough. I do not make that argument, but others might. It is certainly right that the police should pursue those people, who should be questioned, charged and, where appropriate, prosecuted. However, the argument that we are starting from a blank sheet of paper belies the fact that all kinds of anti-discrimination and anti-racism laws exist that allow us to protect those who might be victims of such prejudice.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is right to say that the prejudices and hatred that I described in my opening remarks, and which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Ilford North, are undoubtedly cause for alarm and require action. There being no doubt about that, the argument is about whether this definition of Islamophobia is helpful or not. This debate is not about the intent or our shared commitment to dealing with hatred and prejudice, or about our determination to stand by the people the hon. Lady describes; it is about whether this initiative, APPG report and definition move things on or not. There are differing opinions about that, and they are not all articulate, unhelpful or deliberately obstructive. Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged in his speech, such opinions are exercised in good faith. People may, of course, have tangential views and not act in good faith—he drew attention to that as well—but not all criticism of this is based on bias. Indeed, some criticisms, such as that offered by Mohammed Abdel-Haq, are based on a fear of separation, segregation and stigmatisation.

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Mr Lammy: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept what the definition describes is a form of racism? It does not state racism per se, but rather forms of racism. Does he understand that the historical roots of racism began several hundred years ago, when at the time there was an understanding that the Christian, Aryan, European race was superior to others? For those with a different religious faith, there was a pecking order, which would have put my ancestors, who were African, at the bottom. That is where it comes from. It is a form of prejudice that comes from our history.
Sir John Hayes: That partly depends how far one wants to explore the right hon. Gentleman’s historical point—I imagine his point is largely about the European empires—that predominated in relatively modern history. If we were speaking about the ancient world, none of what he said would be true. If we were talking about the Persian or Ottoman empires, none of what he said would be true. If we talked about the Moorish domination of north Africa and southern Europe, none of what he said would be true.

So, if we are going to use history as a means of legitimising or explaining our arguments, it is important that we do so in as holistic a way as possible, though I do not dispute the fact that the right hon. Gentleman is both honourable and a gentleman—perhaps that is the best way of putting it—because I know he has a long-standing commitment to fighting racism in his constituency and elsewhere.

I know that others want to speak and there are many of them, so I am going to deal with my other points fairly briefly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I did suggest about 10 minutes. We have now gone past the right hon. Gentleman’s 10 minutes, so I am sure he is coming to the end of his great speech.

Sir John Hayes: I did want to give way to other Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is your choice, but obviously it is the choice from the Chair that we stick to around 10 minutes.

Sir John Hayes: In that case, let me draw my remarks to a conclusion with my final two points, which I will deal with very briefly.

We have to take it very seriously indeed when anti-terrorist police, notably Martin Hewitt, who has been mentioned already, describe the risks associated with this initiative in the way that he has. He describes them as “undermining counterterrorist policing powers and tactics.” That very damning criticism should not be dismissed lightly.

We should also take it very seriously when human rights lawyers say that these proposals would lead to judicial reviews and legal confusion which, as the House knows, they have.

Finally, we should, I am afraid, question whether the effect of this debate will not be to fuel the extreme and far right, who I am profoundly concerned are gaining a foothold again in our country. I go back to the 1970s, when I was a member of the Anti-Nazi League and marched against the National Front in Lewisham, Ilford and elsewhere. The far right will see this as a justification for their intolerance and it may well be that what is well intentioned and propounded by decent and honourable people is turned against them. For all those reasons—I could talk about the Policy Exchange report, but I will not—I cannot support the hon. Member for Ilford North, much as I admire him.

1.42 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), with whom I worked during his time as Security Minister. I would like to start by condemning the acts in Christchurch, New Zealand and in Sri Lanka.

I have been on the receiving end of hate mail and actions from both the far right and from the Islamist community. I have taken my job seriously since 2001 and I continue to do so. I am proud to be a British Pakistani Muslim Member of Parliament. I was elected in 2001 for Birmingham, Perry Barr, as the first Muslim to be elected to this Parliament from England. My great-grandfather and his brothers and cousins served in the British merchant navy in the first world war. My grandfather and his brothers and cousins served in the British merchant navy in the second world war. My maternal great-grandfather served in the British Indian Army in the second world war. I am proud of my roots and my heritage. I will take no lessons from anybody who tells me that I am Islamophobic or that I am too much of a Muslim. I am what I am, and I continue to be proud of that heritage. I am proud to be a member of the Labour party, because of its ideals in fighting against antisemitism, Muslim hatred, race hatred and LGBT hatred. I believe in equality and justice for all. That is why I am a Member of Parliament for the Labour party.

My objection to the report on Islamophobia by the all-party group on British Muslims is principled, and I will outline it later in my contribution. It is because of my long-held belief and the work I have done since 2011 that I oppose the report, and I will go deeper into that. That does not deflect from criticism of any political party that does not take Muslim hatred seriously. All political parties are accountable for hatred by any individual, particularly Muslim hatred. Therefore, all parties and all their members—elected or not—should be held to account on that basis.

The foreword of the report is by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who is highly esteemed and highly respected, I think, on both sides of the House. However, I do take slight issue when he says that “Islamophobia was playing a major role in undermining integration and community cohesion.” I have been looking at the issue of integration since 2001. The big problem with integration has predominantly been, from the 1980s and before, the way the Government fund communities. They fund communities to stay in isolation. They have funded the Sikh community, the Hindu community, the Afro-Caribbean community and the Churches community, and everybody is always divided, competing against each other for the bit of funding they get for community recognition. Whatever the issues are, I think they lie with all the communities, but not all communities are subject to Islamophobia in relation to integration.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman has entirely misunderstood the content of my foreword. My foreword was simply designed to make the point that my own experience—I will touch on that in a moment—is that Islamophobia in the widest sense and as understood by the public, which is an irrational hatred directed towards Muslims, is playing a major role in preventing integration, in my view. That is my point. I will amplify it later, but I just want to make that quite clear.
Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that clarification. His foreword is very brief and that is all I had to go on. There are other issues that perhaps we might discuss outside this place.

The key issue not covered by the report is inter-community relations, predominantly within the Muslim community, whether from Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Kenya or elsewhere in Africa.

Sir John Hayes: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to this point and is able to clarify the matter—or perhaps the Chair of the Select Committee could answer it instead. Initially, one of the four key points of the Home Office inquiry that deals with a similar matter was on intra-Muslim prejudice and conflict, but it was dropped. Does he know why it was dropped?

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, but that is above my pay grade and I have no particular knowledge about that.

The point I want to make is about inter-community discrimination. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) is aware of the constituent who murdered a person from the Ahmadi community. We should really reflect on that. [Interuption.] I ask the shadow Minister to listen. I am coming to that, so please carry on listening. When we discuss Islamophobia, we also have to consider inter-community Islamophobia. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) will understand, a huge amount of knife crime is predominantly between Muslim communities, whether Turkish, Pakistani or north African. The other key issue we have to look at is class discrimination. If we are to address the issue holistically and move forward, all these factors are important.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for giving their best endeavours and having the best intentions in working on the report. I take issue not with the great work they have done and their genuine interest—I commend them for the time they spent on the report—but the issues of Islamophobia are not defined in the report. We must look at that seriously, because it needs addressing properly. I will come to that in my conclusions.

The report says that the Prevent policy, followed for a long time by both Labour and Conservative Governments, is Islamophobic. I believe strongly that Prevent must be amended, but that does not mean that it should not be followed. There should be a better interaction through Prevent with mainstream communities, with its work not limited to small organisations. However, the work done in education has been quite good and positive.

People have made exaggerations. A so-called terrorist house was taken up by MEND, but that was a completely different issue. Social services, a school and the police worked together, understood the issue quickly and dealt with it. However, people wanted to expand on it and highlight it further in the media because that suited their cause.

Chapter 3 of the report looks at a particular case. One person said:

“I was stopped at Heathrow airport. The policeman said that they targeted me because of my attire. This has happened to me so many times. I cannot report it because the police do not see this as Islamophobic.”

That goes to the crux of the definition of Muslimness in the report, which is the key issue for us to address. Muslimness is not just about the attire someone wears. I have a very good friend who is a civil engineer and one of the most observant people of his religion I know. He does not walk around wearing a particular turban. He still works as an engineer, although a lot less than he used to because I think he wants to take it easier. He is a devout Muslim, but he cannot be identified through his attire. If the report is to go the way it seems to be, how can we protect those Muslims who dress normally in society but have in their heart those religious beliefs?

I know someone else in Birmingham who has her hair cropped and blonde. She wears western clothes—sometimes skirts and sometimes trousers. Recently she has come back from supporting a charity in Sindh to look after the poor, open their fasts and do those sorts of things. She does not qualify under the Muslimness description, yet she does more for the Muslim community—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mahmood: No. I must make tracks as time is limited.

This person went out there, but some people would look at her and probably not think that she is a Muslim. People can hide these things.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I rise genuinely to try to assist my hon. Friend in putting forward his views. Surely he is not implying—I know he is not—that those who choose to dress or look a certain way are in any way abnormal.

Mr Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification. Of course I am not. I am saying that the definition of Muslimness as described in the report categorises people into those who dress a particular way and those who do not. By definition, the people who do not dress one way are excluded.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the dress code. The issue about Islamophobia is that we know that women who work in headscarves are repeatedly getting attacked and abused. That is where the Muslimness perception comes into it.

Mr Mahmood: I will quickly give way to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, if she wishes, just to be fair.

Anna Soubry indicated dissent.

Mr Mahmood: That is fair enough.

Those are the issues. I am happy to an extent to see people getting frustrated, because our objective is to get a clear definition. That is what I was after, but that is not coming.

Chapter 4 of the report mentions Trojan horse, with which I am familiar. However, the way it is described in the report has no basis in the events on the ground. I was there. I confronted most of those people. I know how girls were made to sit at the back of the school because they were female, how they were all told to cover their heads and how they were supposed to move on. Two reports were done about that by Peter Clarke...
and Ian Kershaw. This report ignores all that work. It is therefore absurd to say that this report does something positive.

The report talks about

“Denying Muslim populations the right to self-determination” in Kashmir. The report also mentions Palestine, but I will concentrate on Kashmir because I am a Kashmiri. There is a considerable proportion of Pandits in Kashmir; it is not just a Muslim state. If such claims are to be made in a major report, please get the facts right. Kashmiris are not all Muslims; there are also Pandits, who have long-standing heritage. In fact, the region of Kashmir was created by a Pandit. People who produce these reports must be mindful of such things.

We need balance in this issue, with us as Muslims able to condemn both sides. When radical action, radicalisation and terrorism take place, we should condemn that, just as we should condemn attacks from the right. We should all do that. This is about the mainstream in the United Kingdom and supporting the mainstream of the community. We as Muslims, given our population and the roles we play in this place, the other place and across the country, should do that, and be proud of who we are. We are proud Muslims, and we should start to move away from a victim mentality and be positive about who we are.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I know the Chairman of Ways and Means reminded colleagues that there are two debates this afternoon and asked if people could confine themselves to 12 minutes. If we cannot do that, I will have to impose a time limit.

1.57 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate—well, I think it is—and it is certainly a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). I found myself agreeing with a great deal of what he had to say, although I was struck by the fact that, I think, he had misunderstood something I had written as part of the foreword to the APPG report.

I was not involved in some of the initial stages of the APPG report, but its members came to me—I was a member in any event—and asked if I could confine themselves to 12 minutes. If we cannot do that, I will have to impose a time limit. Some Members who were around more than 10 years ago will remember that I was rather active when the legislation on incitement to religious hatred was introduced, arguing strongly in the House that the way in which the then Government were seeking to word it risked placing a fetter on free speech because it was too broadly drafted and included such terms as “ridicule”. I considered that it was within the tenets of a free society to express ridicule for another person’s religious beliefs. As a Christian, I encounter people who express ridicule for my beliefs, and I just have to live with it.

That having been said, I live, and have the benefit of living, in what is, in a sense, part of what would be seen as a majority community in this country, and I do not think we should underestimate the adverse impact that what I call Islamophobia is having on our society. It is acting as a preventer of integration, and we in the House should be paying some attention to it, because as leaders in our communities—which is what we are seen to be—we ought to be showing a lead in trying to eradicate it as much as possible. That does not mean preventing people from expressing perfectly reasoned criticisms, or, indeed, sometimes unreasonable criticisms, of other people’s religious beliefs; the point is, human society cannot thrive unless we treat other human beings with respect, and lack of respect can have a corrosive impact.

Yasmin Qureshi: I agree with what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying. He mentioned discrimination. It is right that religions can be criticised, but I am sure he will agree that when certain sections of the media tell blatant lies about Muslims, media discussion of Islam becomes worrisome.

Mr Grieve: I often read in newspapers things about Islam that I know from my own experience—I am a trustee of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies—to be inaccurate. Of course, we must also acknowledge, as, indeed, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr did, that Islam is not a homogenous practice. It is extremely diverse, just as is Christianity or, for that matter, Judaism. There will be areas of practice and criticism within the faith itself. As we know from the events in the middle east and the hostility between Shi’a and Sunni, a deep division, or indeed hostility towards groups who are considered to be heretical, such as Ahmadis, is a real issue.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Both my right hon. and learned Friend and I have a strong relationship with our local Ahmadiyya communities. I think it is worth drawing attention to the role that they play in trying to combat Islamophobia, which, in my opinion, has absolutely no place in any political party or any element of our society in a modern Britain. I pay tribute to the many Members who support the work that is done day in, day out on the streets of our country.

Mr Grieve: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. My view has always been that Islamophobia—which I find quite easy to identify in my own mind—is a process whereby utterly law-abiding individuals who wish to live in peace with their neighbours and get on with their daily lives find themselves subjected to abuse with no rational basis whatsoever, and it is very prevalent. Part of that may be a result of the disturbed conditions in the middle east and the growth of terrorism. I do not think it possible to disconnect the one from the other: the connection is very clear. However, that does not reduce our duty to try to do something about it.
That brings me to the work of the all-party parliamentary group and the foreword that I wrote. Those who were present at the APPG meeting which I attended will remember that I issued a gentle critique of the definition that it had drafted, and we had a very interesting discussion, in particular about the word “racism”, which is common parlance in the House and indeed the country, but whose usage has changed significantly over recent decades. It started as an attempt to define a prejudice or discrimination on the basis of someone’s immutable colour characteristics, but it has evolved over time into meaning something rather broader—I think the penny has gradually dropped that our colour characteristics are not necessarily all that immutable—and has taken on a far more cultural and wider context. It can be defined as hostility to the “other” outside one’s own group.

It was for that reason that the APPG looked at the definition in trying to establish a working definition of Islamophobia that might be useful. As I have said, during the meeting I gently pointed out that I could see where the pitfalls were likely to be, but I wrote the foreword because it seemed to me that it was possible to go round and round in circles, and that seeking a redefinition could well be useful to public authorities and groups that were trying to tackle Islamophobia. I should emphasise that neither I nor—I think—any member of the APPG thought that a new legal definition was being enacted and that condign punishment would be visited on any individual who transgressed what someone else’s definition might be.

I have to say that I am rather depressed to see some of the reaction to this work. I am sorry to have to say it, because I have great respect for Policy Exchange, but a great deal of this report is total and unadulterated rubbish. It strays off into areas that are about a million miles removed from Islamophobia. I really do not know about Mr Hewitt and the police officer and his issues concerning counter-terrorism, but how it could possibly be argued that this definition could prevent the police from enforcing the law against terrorists in this country is beyond my comprehension. It is breathtaking.

The lesson that I derive from this is that, unfortunately, we are treading on eggshells. When attempts to crystallise a definition to enable better debate and understanding—which, in my view, were clearly well-meaning—are immediately transformed into a culture war in which it starts to be alleged that what is being attempted is the suppression of free speech, I become profoundly depressed. The exaggerations in the report seem to demonstrate a reverse fear that, somehow, the word “Islamophobia” is being used as a weapon on the law-abiding when people reasonably highlight anxiety over terrorism, or practices within some communities that are regarded as being bad, a view that I believe to be shared throughout the House. That is far removing us from what I think the reaction to this work. I am sorry to have to say it, because I have great respect for Policy Exchange, but a great deal of this report is total and unadulterated rubbish. It strays off into areas that are about a million miles removed from Islamophobia. I really do not know about Mr Hewitt and the police officer and his issues concerning counter-terrorism, but how it could possibly be argued that this definition could prevent the police from enforcing the law against terrorists in this country is beyond my comprehension. It is breathtaking.

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Let me issue a plea to the Secretary of State. He has a rather unenviable task in this respect, but I hope that he will not dismiss the APPG’s report out of hand, because it does not deserve to be dismissed. It is clearly based on good intentions and a wish to identify a way forward. If we stop flying off the handle and disappearing into the most extraordinary and bizarre places—I am sorry to have to say that I felt that that was happening a little bit when I listened to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—we may make some progress, and I hope that this debate will facilitate it. That, I think, was the purpose of the APPG’s report, which is why I wrote the foreword.

I cannot get away from the fact that there is a real problem here, and we need to tackle it. This is an area in which we need to show leadership.

2.9 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): As vice-chair of the all-party group on British Muslims, I thank my colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), for applying for this hugely important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Truth be told, when I look across the House today, I realise this debate is not just about the definition of Islamophobia; it is also about the ever-prevalent Islamophobia across our society and in the online world peddled by the far right, leading to attacks every day on British Muslims, and the acceptable norms of prejudice passed across the dinner table and, frankly, in enclaves of the Tory party that fuel Islamophobia or allow it to be ignored.

Those watching this debate will notice that, although every other Westminster political party has accepted the APPG definition of Islamophobia, one party has not: the Conservative party, which refuses to accept the definition. Indeed, every party in Scotland, including the Conservative party, has accepted and endorsed the definition. I pay tribute to Ruth Davidson for showing great leadership on that.

I originally prepared my speech for the debate that was postponed. Sadly, I can no longer deliver that speech because, just in the last 24 hours, I have witnessed the orchestrated nature of a machine that has come out in spectacular fashion in a continued attempt to shut down the voices and experiences of ordinary British Muslims. What I say today is neither a conspiracy nor some delusional hyperbole. I am referring to the fact that the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, Martin Hewitt, wrote to the Prime Minister suggesting that the APPG definition of Islamophobia creates some sort of security risk. Let me put this to bed once and for all: this is a non-legally binding working definition, which is why that assertion is simply plain stupid. It is as stupid as saying that, because we have a non-legally binding definition of antisemitism, we can no longer do foreign policy in the middle east.

I am a member of the National Police Chiefs’ Council national roundtable for race, religion and belief, which until this week was chaired by Chief Constable Jon Boutcher. He was not aware of Martin Hewitt’s letter or concerns. Furthermore, Chief Constable Ian Hopkins, the national lead on matters of policing and diversity from Greater Manchester police, did not know either, and nor did John Robins, my chief constable in Yorkshire.

What is deeply worrying is not only that Martin Hewitt attributes concerns to his colleagues without actually speaking to them, but that the intervention suggests that the police have a disgraceful lack of understanding of hate crimes. They recognise the importance of having racism and antisemitism defined, but the intervention
suggests that the police are blind to the same need for Muslims, despite the fact that year on year the police have consistently produced figures that show an increase in hate crime against Muslims.

This is not just about a Government who are failing to listen to the British Muslim communities; this is about a Government who on the eve of this debate coincidently and conveniently had a security leak from within their highest office, the office of the Prime Minister, with the serious concerns of the protection of British Muslims played out as a game on the front pages of a national newspaper. This is no longer about a political party that is institutionally Islamophobic; this is about a Government telling a section of those they govern they will not only silence their voices and ignore their legitimate fears, but define their experiences and actively shut down those trying to represent their views.

If it is down to the experiences of women to define feminism, the experiences of people of colour to define racism, the experiences of Jews to define antisemitism, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities to define homophobia, I say to the Secretary of State: how dare he tell British Muslims that our experiences cannot define Islamophobia. If that is not a pernicious form of racism, what is it?

For me this is much more than just rejecting the definition. It is disgraceful when the most senior Muslim woman in the Tory party, the former chair of the party, Baroness Warsi, continuously calls for an inquiry into Islamophobia, yet time and again that is completely ignored. It is despicable that the Conservative party ran a dog-whistle Islamophobic campaign against the London Mayor Sadiq Khan and still refuses to apologise. It is unacceptable that, when I called for a debate on Islamophobia in this Chamber, the Leader of the House responded with blatant othering by suggesting that this was an issue for the Foreign Office, thus saying that British Muslims are not citizens of this nation. Maybe she was taking lessons from her colleague, the Home Secretary; I do not know. It is scandalous and frankly an act of misconduct in every field of work for a male to demean women for the way they choose to dress, yet it is unapologetically acceptable for the former Foreign Secretary to describe women in burkas as “letter boxes” and “bank robbers”. It is hypocrisy of the highest order when the Conservative party’s internal complaints procedure when dealing with Islamophobes is to publicly suspend them and privately sneak them back in when it thinks nobody is watching.

While all the above could be explained as a party in denial, the leak suggests this is a party in government that is willing to orchestrate a campaign to reject the recognition of the very real and prevalent nature of Islamophobia. A line has been crossed, beyond the failure to act, to send a clear message to British Muslim communities that this Government are not serious about the safety and security of British Muslims. As a British Muslim woman, that message is clear to me today, as it will be to those up and down this country.

In March 2018, when the right hon. Member for Broxtowe said to the Government that it was high time for there to be a proper legal definition of Islamophobia, the response from the Minister was:

“We do not accept the need for a definitive definition”. —[Official Report, 12 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 595.]

So a year ago, the Government said they did not need a definition and today they are saying they need a definition but just not the one accepted by British Muslims. They choose to reject the definition that is rooted in the experiences of British Muslims and thus is widely accepted by over 750 Muslims institutions and organisations.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I can say hand on heart that she is speaking with the passion and clarity that I hear in mosques and Muslim community centres in my constituency. I heard from the Conservative Benches the comments that clearly not all Muslims agree with this definition and that is true, but I would just, through her, ask the Secretary of State to reflect on the same claims that are made by members of my own party about Jewish Voice for Labour and by other fringe groups who consistently seek to undermine the real fight against antisemitism. I am not talking about Members of this House who disagree; I am talking about fringe siren voices. Do not mistake the views of a minority with the views of the majority.

**Naz Shah:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and he is absolutely right. The truth is that the Conservative party refuses to accept the definition accepted by over 750 institutions and organisations from across the spectrum, spanning from the Muslim Council of Britain, the largest umbrella body for British Muslims, to prominent Muslim women groups such as the Muslim Women’s Network, to British Muslims for Secular Democracy, and that is in addition to 80 academics, some of whose life’s work has been on racism.

In the spirit of speaking about freedoms, let me turn the Secretary of State’s attention to article 3 of the universal declaration of human rights: “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of a person”.

So I ask him: when Mohammed Suleem was murdered in 2013 in an Islamophobic terrorist attack, where was his freedom? Where was his right to life? Where was the national response from the Government? Where were the advisers forming a definition of Islamophobia?

When Mushin Ahmed, an 81-year-old grandfather from Rotherham, was murdered in 2015 in an Islamophobic terrorist attack, where was the Government response to his murder? In fact, never mind the Government not forming any sort of strategy to tackle Islamophobia: after his right to life was denied—after the duty to protect a Muslim grandfather was failed—where was the Government statement? Where was the Cobra meeting? Why was there no taskforce? Why have this Government failed to act while Islamophobia has continued to rise and rise and rise? It then took the third far-right Islamist attack, the mowing down of Makram Ali outside Finsbury park in Ramadan 2017, for the Government to finally acknowledge that this was terrorism.

I make no apologies for my emotions today. It has only been two months since we saw the deadly attacks in Christchurch, where over 50 Muslims were murdered at their place of worship. I do not want to personalise this debate, but I think it is important to give examples to illustrate the problem. These are just a handful of comments directed towards me—the ones I could read without crying. Beyond that, Muslims receive such abuse every single day as they go about their daily lives:

“I will shut you up”; “I will do time for you”; “I hope you see your children dead in your arms”; and “You don’t deserve life...You are pure evil and your clock is ticking.”
Lives have been lost, globally and in the UK, and only now has the Islamophobia debate got to this stage — and even then through a Backbench Business debate. If we do not act today, I ask which Muslim’s life must go next before we simply recognise and understand Islamophobia. Never before have I shared this openly, but I do question, as many Muslims across this country do, which Muslim’s life will be next and whether it will be mine.

So I ask the Secretary of State and the Government to rethink their decision. It is high time we accepted this definition and moved forward to actually tackle Islamophobia. For those of privilege, a definition—or no definition—is just semantics, but for British Muslims, it is about their safety, the security of their lives and the fear of their sisters’ hijabs being pulled off on the streets. It is about their places of worship being attacked while they pray; it is about being denied a job because of streets. It is about their places of worship being attacked; it is about their safety, the security of their lives and the

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I have also discussed this matter at length with the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Tariq Ahmed of Wimbledon. As well as being the Prime Minister’s special representative on freedom of religion and belief, he is one of the most senior members of the British Ahmadiyya community. He agrees with the term “Islamophobia” and believes that this definition protects the Ahmadiyya community. What better assurance could the Government want than that? I share this because, when speaking to various Ministers from the Home Office, one of the concerns raised has been the issue of the definition not dealing with sectarianism. I put it to the Minister that, if sectarianism is something that this Government want to address, we can convene a roundtable with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, representatives of ultra-orthodox and liberal Jewry, the plethora of sects and castes within the British Hindu community and representatives of various Muslim sects and other religions to ensure that we consider the issue of sectarianism in its totality. Surely the Secretary of State is not suggesting that the Government are only interested in sectarianism within the Muslim community, because such an exceptionalist approach would be dangerous and divisive.

To conclude, the choice of which side of history the Government choose to stand on is a choice for them, but the fight for equal protection for British Muslims will go on. Those of us, Muslim or not, who believe in equality for all will stand shoulder to shoulder with them. The Conservative party has sadly always found itself on the wrong side of history. It did so with women’s rights and with the rights of black people and of the LGBTQ+ community. Every time, it finds itself on the wrong side of history and, every time, it is my party that has to teach it what equality means. Once again today, as we see Islamophobia on the rise, we see the Conservative party failing even to acknowledge the term “Islamophobia” or give this latest form of racism a definition.

Over the past month, I have seen this Government—and those connected to them through a tangled web of think-tanks, newspapers and other ideological bedfellows—ramp up their opposition to British Muslims who are seeking a protection framework equal to those given to our fellow citizens. This has not gone unnoticed in Parliament, in our constituencies, on the streets or in the homes where a young British Muslim community feels that, under this Government, it has been forced to frame and fight its own civil rights movement. The effect of this will eventually be felt in Parliament when the Conservatives, now no longer fit to govern, feel the consequences, through the ballot box, of failing to give everyone in this country equal value and worth. If I, as a Muslim woman MP representing the largest Muslim constituency in the country, do not feel safe, how do I tell those people that they will be safe?

Several hon. Members rose——

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To accommodate everyone who wants to speak, I am now going to put in place a 10-minute time limit.

2.24 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing this debate, and I commend them and their colleagues in the all-party group on British Muslims for making history by putting together the first definition of Islamophobia. This definition is the culmination of almost two years of consultation and evidence gathering. It is a concrete definition that takes into account the views of organisations, politicians, faith leaders, eminent academics, victims of hate crime and communities up and down the country. I hope that the Secretary of State will have listened to the comments made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who has also urged the Government to adopt the definition.

To tackle Islamophobia, we need to address a number of different issues, one of which is the role of the media. In Australia, where the Christchurch killer was born, raised and possibly radicalised, there has been a lot of debate on the extent to which the media—particularly that owned by Rupert Murdoch—contributed to sowing the seeds of hate that went unchallenged in Christchurch. A study published in Sydney tallied up the number of negative stories that five Australian newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch produced in 2017. It found that almost 3,000 such stories referred to Islam or Muslims, alongside the words “violence”, “terrorism” or “radical”. Authors of the study reported that “once every second day in 2017 there was a front page that demonised and spoke negatively about Muslims”.

Yes, it was on social media where the killer spread his ideology, but we need to recognise that white supremacy and other ideologies of hate predate the internet. So while we are right to pay attention to the sheer speed and global reach of the internet, we need to talk about how hateful ideologies come into being and what allows them to flourish.

The print and broadcast media are not without their share of responsibility. Recently, in an open letter to a newspaper, 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, 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 cited the 2017 terror attack in Finsbury Park as an example of where a man was “driven to an act of terror by far-right messaging he found mostly on mainstream media”.

It is time we accepted that a large proportion of the British press incites hatred against Muslims to millions of people every day. This is not about freedom of speech; it is plain, downright lying published in our media, day in, day out. For example, a **Daily Express** front page has proclaimed: “Muslims tell British: Go to hell”. The **Daily Star** printed the headline: “UK mosques fundraising for terror” then later apologised. Or let us consider the front page of **The Sun**, which declared that “I in 5 Brit Muslims” had sympathy for jihadists, accompanied by a picture of “Jihadi John” wielding a knife. Months later, it acknowledged that its claims were misleading, but such retractions are always just two sentences occupying a tiny space at the back of the newspaper.

Such inaccuracies are not restricted to the tabloid press. **The Times**, for example, claimed Muslims were “silent on terror”. On another occasion, it issued a correction for a story headlined “Christian child forced into Muslim foster care”, which turned out to be a complete bag of lies. The **Daily Mail** then picked up on that story and showed a picture of a woman wearing a veil, suggesting that this was the lady who had adopted the child. That was a lie as well, because although the woman in question was a Muslim, she did not wear a veil. **The Spectator** published a piece claiming that “there is not nearly enough Islamophobia within the Conservative party”.

It is not just misleading stories that are the problem. We consistently see articles that conflate Islam with criminality: “Muslim sex grooming” or “Imam beaten to death in sex grooming town”, for example. The latter resulted in the chief constable of Greater Manchester police writing an open letter criticising the newspaper.

A study from Lancaster University highlighted that for every mention of “moderate” Muslims in the media, there are 21 references to “extremist” Muslims, and that Muslims are collectively homogenised and portrayed as a threat to the “British way of life”. A study conducted by the University of Alabama found that Muslim extremists received 357% more coverage than non-Muslim extremists; by contrast, far-right terrorists are rationalised, understood to be lone wolves, or excused because they are suffering from poor mental health, instead of recognising the hatred that actually drove their atrocious actions. We saw that in the **Daily Mirror**’s coverage of Christchurch, describing the killer as an “angelic boy” in an attempt to humanise him and focusing on Muslims as victims. I do not think we have seen such a description given to any terrorist who happens to be Muslim.

In opinion pieces, the problem is even more apparent. **The Sun**’s Trevor Kavanagh ended one column with the question: “What will we do about the Muslim problem then?”

We all know what that means. In July 2016, Fatima Manji reported on the Nice terror attack for Channel 4. Kelvin MacKenzie attacked her in *The Sun*, asking why a woman in a headscarf was reporting on a terrorist incident. Musing on why Channel 4 chose Manji for the slot, MacKenzie asked, “Was it done to stick one in the eye of the ordinary viewer who looks at the hijab as a sign of the slavery of Muslim women by a male-dominated and clearly violent religion?”

Those are just the tip of the iceberg of lies in the media about Islam.

That should lead us to ask why this is happening. The answer is simple: stories that play on public fears and feed prejudices are popular, especially in times when, according to polls, more than half of British people see Islam as a threat to western liberal democracy, and others may not see Muslims as threats but feel softer dislike and that Muslims and Islam are not compatible. The fact is that most people in this country have probably never met a Muslim person and know nothing about Islam, but their reading and understanding of Islam are derived from the media. That is why so many of them, when surveyed, express views that clearly show that they have been affected by what they read.

Research by Cambridge University showed that mainstream media reporting on the Muslim community was contributing to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain, corroborating the findings of an Islamophobia roundtable in Stockholm. Do the Minister and the Government accept that the media have played a role in the growth of Islamophobia and that that is no longer tenable?

This is not a matter of freedom of speech; it is about the choice of editors to tolerate, if not encourage, bigotry in our papers. We live in a country that rightly cherishes freedom of the press, and that must be respected, but freedom comes with responsibility, which must be upheld. To publish inaccurate stories helps the rise of the far right; the othering of Muslims has real-world consequences. The National Union of Journalists understands that and has demanded an inquiry into Islamophobia in the media. Done properly, that could have the impact that the Macpherson report had on the police and encourage a sea change in attitudes. Will the Minister commit today to set up a Government inquiry into Islamophobia in the media?

These are not just my concerns. Respectable academics and think-tanks are concerned about what is happening. Last year, in the Home Affairs Committee, the new owner of the **Daily Express** said: “Each and every editor has a responsibility for every single word that’s published in a newspaper. Cumulatively, some of the headlines that have appeared in the past have created an Islamophobic sentiment which I find uncomfortable”.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order.

2.34 pm

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): First, I thank all those who have taken part in this important debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for securing it. We in this House have an absolute duty to eliminate all forms of hate crime and discrimination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), and perhaps others, have referred to personal experiences. I believe it takes guts and great courage to refer to personal situations in this place. Tragically, in the current political climate, many politicians and public servants in the frontline are being subjected to some atrocious behaviour, and I salute the courage of those who speak out. I, like many others, constantly receive Islamophobic hate mail and other expressions of Islamophobia, but I refuse to recount those instances.
here today. I refuse to give air time to those who want people like me to air their views—their views of hatred and division—in this place. I refuse to do that here today.

Of course we need a definition of Islamophobia—on that much, I think everyone can agree. There are a number of definitions, starting with the Runnymede definition; then there is the all-party group’s definition, and I know that in my home town Bradford’s Council for Mosques is working on a definition. All those are important, but it is the aim of them all that I want to focus on. The aim of the definition is to eradicate Islamophobia, and that is where I want to concentrate my remarks. We cannot eradicate Islamophobia if we do not understand Islamophobia. That is the point.

This debate takes place against a disgusting backdrop of rising Islamophobic hate crime. Over half of all religiously motivated hate crimes recorded in 2017-18—almost 3,000—were committed against Muslims. Although abusive behaviour forms the core of recorded Islamophobia, we cannot downplay the number and severity of the physical attacks, many of the offences being of an extremely serious nature. Even at mosques and other places of worship, where Muslims should feel safe, they face both physical and verbal abuse and violence, with the number of attacks on mosques doubling and Muslims being left scared and vulnerable.

We simply cannot ignore the stark evidence facing us that Islamophobia is dramatically on the rise. We certainly cannot do so at a time when we are witnessing the rapid resurgence of far-right, fascist, white supremacist groups now fixated on persecuting Muslims and promoting Islamophobia. Those groups are pushing bigoted, xenophobic views of Muslims and others, and they are not only feeding on, but driving, an environment where it is now seen as acceptable to abuse and attack Muslims. With growing traffic to far-right websites and social media personalities, a growing number of foiled far-right terror plots and a membership that is younger and more fixated on persecuting Muslims and promoting Islamophobia. Those groups are pushing bigoted, racially motivated hate, to ensure the perpetrators of Islamophobic hate crimes are brought to justice. I will conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, as time does not permit me to speak for long—although I am grateful for the 10 minutes I was promised. We must commit ourselves to ending the marginalisation of Muslims in society and to enforcing a zero-tolerance approach. If the Government are to prove they are serious about tackling the shameful rise in Islamophobia and the isolation of Muslims, they must do more to tackle the dangerous rise of the far right and end the practice of giving a high-profile platform to extremists. They must reaffirm and ensure an absolute responsibility and obligation on those in public office and in the media not to promote, fuel and normalise Islamophobia and Islamophobic tropes. They must take every available action, including legislation and adopting a firm definition of religiously and racially motivated hate, to ensure the perpetrators of Islamophobic hate crimes are brought to justice.

I say to the Minister that a definition cannot be forced downwards by political leaders or organisations, but must come up from the grassroots Muslim community. The House has a duty to speak up for Muslims and all those who face abuse, prejudice and discrimination. It is time we demanded more.

2.44 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): At a primary school a few years back, I met a little girl who told me how scared she had been when she heard about a plane that had flown into the side of a mountain. She was not scared to fly—oh no; she was terrified that the pilot
would turn out to be Muslim. I do not want to live in a country where our children are worried about the faith of a person who does wicked things. By the age of eight, she had been so affected by Islamophobia and the racism in and around us all that she had taken on a collective guilt. She felt it keenly. She almost accepted that she personally would be responsible if that pilot shared her religion. What a world.

Despite her age, this little girl knew all about Islamophobia—whichever definition we choose—about racism and about the blaming of people for the real or imaginary sins of another who shares their ethnicity, nationality or religion. She knew that many people were ready to hate her, her family and friends, and could even harm them. She almost felt it would be justified. I do not want to live in a world where our children feel like that.

I remember the fear among my Muslim friends, neighbours and constituents after the 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2017 attacks. That fear is clearly justified. There was a shocking 40% increase in reported religiously motivated hate crimes. One in four Muslims worries about being physically attacked. Several of the most recent Islamophobic attacks have been on children and—appallingly—have been perpetrated by children. In 2017, a group of six boys surrounded a 13-year-old Muslim boy, pushed him to the ground and kicked him again and again in the head. He could have been killed. Later that year, two boys, 10 and 13, were attacked in Manchester by a group led by a boy of 12 evidently filled with hate.

As we know, last year 15-year-old Jamal, a refugee from Syria, was subjected to violence and simulated torture within his own school. We have since learned that his sister has also been viciously attacked, her headscarf being pulled off. The family’s lawyer has now revealed that, because of the trauma she has received in this country—not in Syria—at the hands of Islamophobes, she has attempted suicide. As we know, Jamal’s alleged attacker was 16 and had, according to reports, consumed far-right propaganda on social media. We have allowed Islamophobia to take hold. We have to act to stop it.

The Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge attacks were followed by the clearly Islamophobic terror attack in Finsbury Park. As we know, the perpetrator of that attack was inspired by exactly the same kind of far-right propaganda and rhetoric that was associated with the terrorist murder in Christchurch in March and the terrorist murder of our Labour sisters and brothers in Norway in 2011.

Evil rhetoric has power not just because it causes violence, but because it creates fear and causes children to be afraid because of the faith they hold. We cannot tolerate it for a second. That fear has been on the rise again in my constituency after the heart-wrenching act of terror in Christchurch and the systematic vandalism of mosques in Birmingham. I am proud to say that our mosques in Newham are responding with unity. More than 40 mosque and community leaders attended a meeting last month to recommit to work together to keep our neighbourhoods safe from hate. It was a powerful first step, and I thank Councillors Mas Patel, Hanif Abdulmuhit and Salim Patel for organising it and I thank all the attendees.

I am also really grateful to the Community Security Trust, to Dave Rich and to others who have offered their time, experience and solidarity to the Muslim community in Newham to help with their community safety efforts. My mosque groups have readily accepted that help because, sadly, the CST gained its expertise because Jewish communities have also been so consistently under threat for so long. Its knowledge has been won from pain.

The same poisonous rhetoric that has long targeted our Jewish communities is being used to incite hatred and violence by Islamophobes, racists and fascists, and the rhetoric is sometimes directed at both Jewish and Muslim communities simultaneously by the same people. These hatemongers talk about replacement. They spread lies to present white people in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand as being under threat. While the Nazi lie was that Jewish people were conspiring to control and replace white people directly, many fascists today weave antisemitism and Islamophobia together. Today’s alt-right say that so-called liberal elites, with Jewish people such as philanthropist George Soros always front and centre, support migrants and multiculturalism because we are trying to replace white people and Christian traditions with people, beliefs and practices that are both foreign and threatening.

The rhetoric about the so-called great replacement is as horrific as it is false. Chillingly, it echoes some of the propaganda that the Nazis used to prepare for the utter horror of the holocaust. Here and now, it is inciting acts of Islamophobic and antisemitic terror. Such racist lies were referred to by the terrorists who attacked synagogues in Pittsburgh last year and in California just last month. If the terrorists’ manifesto is anything to go by, they were equally as influential in inspiring the murder of those 51 innocent worshippers in Christchurch this March. The perpetrator was totally focused on spreading those lies and, to our shame, social media platforms let him do so effectively with the livestream of the atrocity. I struggle to imagine just how terrifying it would have been to be at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch—the shock, the confusion, the fear, the terror. I know that children in my constituency imagine it for themselves when they are at their mosque. It is beyond words.

That is what the idea of a great replacement has led to over and over again in recent years. The conspiracy theories are obviously false, but we need to take them seriously because they are spreading. The rhetoric is aiding the fascists, whom we have fought and defeated over again, with their mission of terror, division and murder. We have to see the exponents of those ideas for what they are—the polite, young, well-dressed, articulate, nicely spoken ones as well as the skinheads—and we must do everything we can from this House to stop this poison from spreading.

It has never been more important to put solidarity against racist and religious hatred first and foremost. To do that, we must understand what forms it takes and how they are connected and interconnected. I welcome the progress that has been made with establishing a definition for Islamophobia, because we need one. I would probably prefer the simpler one by the Runnymede Trust, but that is frankly irrelevant. We need a working definition, and we should be clear that Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism. However, what I want most of all is action. We need to propose concrete steps today to protect Muslim communities, build solidarity and halt the spread of racist hate, and I hope that we will hear that when the Minister responds.
Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I agree with everything that she, every other Opposition speaker and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) have said.

I hope that the Secretary of State has listened to all the speeches made in support of the definition and that he will take away from them the following. The fact is that if the Conservative party is to understand why it has to examine the reaction to this report and read in Hansard the speech of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who I am sorry is no longer in his place. On his basis, the report has been dismissed for no other reason than that the chairs of the APPG are white liberals. Well, I am proud to be called a white, small “l” liberal, and I am even more proud to have helped form this report. I played a very small part in it. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) played a considerable part in bringing it all together, and I am sure he will agree that the report was driven by Baroness Warsi, a member and former chair of the Conservative party. Those are interesting and valid points.

I speak as a former barrister. As a barrister, I was taught to look at the evidence. I am not a Muslim and, as it happens, there are very few Muslims in my constituency. The hon. Member for Ilford North is not a Muslim. He has told us about his own faith, and I have no faith. The fact is that we have absolutely no stake in any of this. We are not from that community, but we are open-hearted and open-minded, and I hope that others will think that that has contributed to what we have done.

We listened. This report, which I am so proud of—it is one of the things I am most proud of in my nine years in this place—is based on the evidence of British Muslims. Unfortunately, too many of them live every day with prejudice, intolerance and Islamophobia. That is their lives. It is what defines them and that cannot be right—it is wrong. We have to stop talking about it and start acting and we begin that action to eradicate Islamophobia, which is rising in our society, by defining it. That is the right thing to do, even though on a previous occasion, as the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) reminded us, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), said that the Government’s view was that we did not need a definition. I am pleased that the Government now accept that we need a definition. I say to the Secretary of State that it is here, in this report.

We went into this with absolutely no fixed views whatsoever—none at all. Month after month, we took evidence from individual Muslims and community groups that represent real British Muslims with real-life experiences. We also broadened the process out to politicians. For example, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) was one of our best witnesses. He is not a Muslim but he talked about his experiences as a Member of Parliament. The issue has been close to his heart for many years. We also spoke to academics.

We gathered the evidence and then we sat down and tried to work out a definition. I was in the Conservative party at the time and wrote in an email, “Islamophobia is racism”. It is racist—that is its root. That is what it is about. I think there was a universal sense of shock among the group that I had come to that conclusion. Obviously, the hon. Member for Ilford North came to the same conclusion. When we look at the evidence and understand where academic thought has got to, we see that of course Islamophobia is rooted in racism and it is racism.

We then had a discussion, which the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield began to discuss. It was one of the best debates in a group that I have ever attended. I am so sorry he is not in his place, but he would agree that he was cynical about saying that this was rooted in racism—and rightly so because many people would be. But he sat and listened and we had this vigorous, brilliant debate with young Muslim academics, older Muslim academics, other academics and many others who have studied this, and he was convinced. I gently say to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings that it is extraordinary for him to criticise this report, which I doubt he has read, based on a breakfast and then another report, which the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and others have rightly utterly demolished. Read this report and understand why we have come to these conclusions.

If I wanted to know about racism, I would be more likely to listen to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy); given that he is a black British man, I think he might know a little more about racism than the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings. If I want to know about race and what racism is, I am again going to turn to the right hon. Member for Tottenham because he clearly knows a lot about it, not because of the colour of his skin, but because he has actually done some research and has listened to the academics and many others. He understands, among other things, the root of the word “racism”, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield does. It is a fascinating lesson in history to understand how “racism” emerged as a word, what it meant and how it has developed, not just over decades, but over centuries.
offensive language aimed at individual Muslims right through to terrorist murders— is anti-Muslim hatred. The computer that churns out a higher insurance premium for somebody simply because they have Mohammed in their name does not hate Muslims. Indeed, the person who put the information in to churn out that nonsense probably does not hate Muslims either. So we must not fall into the trap of saying that it is anti-Muslim hatred.

This is a cracking report. It is based on evidence from the people who know and understand this. It has been accepted by dozens of their communities and by every political party, apart from the Conservative party. If it is good enough for Ruth Davidson, it is good enough for our Prime Minister.

3.4 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The debate has been excellent, and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who explained the work of the all-party group. My good friend the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) led the debate quite superbly.

I am proud to represent a diverse parliamentary constituency. As the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, the Muslim faith is one of peace, love and charity, and that is my experience of the Muslim community in Glasgow South West. We have the Scottish Police Muslim Association, alongside the Glasgow South West food bank, which provides a community kitchen once a month to help the most vulnerable in our society by providing them with a hot meal. We have many charitable organisations, including the Crookston Community Group, and many of them are led by those of the Muslim faith, who are doing great work throughout the community.

The all-party group’s report “Islamophobia Defined” proposes the following working definition:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

I did not quite understand some of the criticisms of the report or the definition, which has come about as a result of a six-month inquiry. As we have heard, that inquiry took evidence from academics, lawyers, victims groups and British Muslim organisations, and included input from Member of the Scottish Parliament Anas Sarwar, who is chair of the Scottish Parliament’s cross-party group on tackling Islamophobia, along with the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society, one of the office-bearers of which is my good friend Sabir Beg.

All that input has gone into looking at a definition, and as we have heard that definition has been endorsed by the Muslim Council of Britain, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Muslim Women’s Network and the Edinburgh central mosque in Scotland. The Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru have adopted the definition, as has the Scottish National party Westminster group. We are now going to feed that into our internal party structures so that the definition can be adopted at our next conference. It seems to me that a lot of serious work, thought, input and discussion has gone into the definition.

Several comments were made about hate crimes. The Scottish Government’s publication “Religiously aggravated offending in Scotland” has figures on the proportion of charges for offences that relate to Islamophobia. In 2010-11, there were 15 charges that were defined as Islamophobia, and that number rose to 115 in 2017-18. The number of charges in relation to other offences peaked in 2015-16, when there were 134 charges, of which 57 were recorded during one incident involving a march in Glasgow. It should be noted that the police in Scotland do not record the religion of the victims of religiously aggravated offences, so the data has been derived by analysing police reports and is based on the details of the incident and what the accused said and did. As such, the figures presented on the targeted religion should not necessarily be regarded as definitive.

We are deeply concerned about the growing levels of Islamophobia and other forms of intolerance seen recently not just in the UK, but around the world. Islamophobia is a real, lived experience, as confirmed by a 2018 ComRes poll that found that 58% of people thought that Islamophobia was a real problem in today’s society. A poll of 1,000 Muslims conducted by ComRes for BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme in 2015 found that 46% of Muslims felt that prejudice against Islam makes it very difficult to be a Muslim in this country. Others have mentioned the despicable terrorist attack in Christchurch in New Zealand, which is a grave reminder of what Islamophobia can become if it is left unchallenged.

We need to provide a vision of a nation free from fear, prejudice and discrimination, and we should all continue to work for that. As I outlined, I am proud to represent a constituency that, like many others throughout Scotland and the UK, has a vibrant and dynamic Muslim community who play a valuable role in our society and strengthen our interfaith relationships.

The SNP Westminster Group considered the definition very carefully and decided to adopt it. The all-party definition was arrived at following a careful and robust process and wide consultation with the Muslim community. That is important and it is why we should give this definition our support today.

On Islamophobic comments by politicians, I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for Bradford West and agreed with what she said. She reminded us that we all have a duty and a responsibility to be careful about what we say and to make sure that what we are saying is not intolerant or incendiary. Of course, the former Foreign Secretary’s remarks about Muslim women were cited in the APPG report. Those remarks were utterly inexcusable and should be called out for what they were. We should not stand by and expect dog-whistle Islamophobia. I have to say that the Conservative party really must stand firm against such grotesquely offensive and intentional comments, or risk normalising toxic and bigoted rhetoric. At a time when political discourse is alienating many, we all must consider the language that we use and reject intolerance.

It has been a pleasure to speak in the debate and to support the all-party group’s definition of Islamophobia.

3.11 pm

Afar Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I wholeheartedly congratulate the all-party group on British Muslims, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing the debate. I also thank the 19 hon. Members who have spoken for their meaningful contributions.
The all-party group has worked tirelessly on creating this definition and done a brilliant job. The definition has widespread support across the community and the confidence of more than 750 organisations. It has been adopted by the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Scottish Conservatives, and the Mayors of London and Greater Manchester, as well as by the National Union of Students and councils across the country. I want to applaud the aforementioned for taking this positive step. Defining and naming a problem is the first step to rooting it out.

As we enter the second week of Ramadan, I am humbled by the charitable deeds of the Muslim community across the country. This is a time for charity, reflection and community—values from which we can all greatly benefit. British Muslim charities raise, on average, £100 million during the month of Ramadan alone. It is therefore with great sadness that I must talk today about the growing problem of Islamophobia, which is apparent not only in the UK, but across Europe.

This Government have shown through their refusal to accept the definition proposed by the all-party group that they are in pure denial over Islamophobia. To add insult to injury, they cannot even bring themselves to use the term “Islamophobia”. How can the Government possibly deal with a problem that they cannot even name?

Cross-party calls for an inquiry into Islamophobia in the Conservative party, as well as calls from the Muslim community and key organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, British Muslims for Secular Democracy and even the Conservative Muslim Forum, continue to fall on politically deaf ears. What concerns me is that the Conservative party has an institutional problem. Recently, it suspended close to 50 members over alleged Islamophobia. Why is it that the Conservative party deals with Islamophobia. The Muslim community in our country deserve an explanation and an apology.

I have written to the Conservative chairman three times about this issue, and I have also asked the Prime Minister on three occasions to adopt the definition and to undertake an independent inquiry into the Conservative party. Each time her answer has fallen disappointingly short. Those members who engage in Islamophobia are not reprimanded. Even worse, they are simply let back into the party. Jeff Potts, a councillor in Solihull, had shared a post on Twitter saying:

“Deport and repatriate all Muslims from the UK or watch terrorists kill innocent people for generations to come.”

But just two days ago, his suspension was quietly lifted. That sends a very loud and clear message that Islamophobia is acceptable. Sadly, responses from the Facebook supporters’ group of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) to my statement about the Conservative party expressed serious concerns over Roger Scruton. Despite his record of hateful and Islamophobic remarks, the Secretary of State defended him as a champion of free speech. Last month, the Government were finally forced to sack him, after he again made Islamophobic, antisemitic and homophobic comments. But why did the Secretary of State defend him? Why has Roger Scruton not been stripped of his knighthood? If the Secretary of State carried out due diligence, why did these vile comments not ring alarm bells? Will the Secretary of State now apologise for having defended this Islamophobe and for keeping him in post for so long? The whole episode lays bare the profound lack of concern of the Conservative party and the Prime Minister about Islamophobia. The Muslim community in our country deserve an explanation and an apology.

Critics of the APPG’s definition have argued that it should not say that Islamophobia is rooted in racism. However, all the evidence proves otherwise. Home Office data reveals that referrals to Prevent for extreme right-wing ideology increased by 36% last year over the previous year. The ugly face of right-wing racism reared its head in the horrific Christchurch attacks—a sobering reminder of the dangers of Islamophobia.

Here in the UK, we have seen the chilling results of Islamophobia, too: Mohammed Saleem was stabbed by an extreme right-wing racist who wanted to spark a race war in Britain; and Makram Ali died after Darren Osborne ran a van into a crowd of Muslims leaving late night prayers during Ramadan. Such examples frighteningly illustrate that Islamophobia can kill. If those acts of violence are not racism targeted at expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness, what are they? How can anyone claim that those attacks were not racist and that they did not target Muslims? However, they are not isolated occurrences. The recent Home Office hate crime statistics were also very telling. The data showed that 52% of religious hate crimes recorded by the police were against Muslims. With the European elections fast approaching, the rise of the extreme right wing has been deeply concerning, and the number of Islamophobic incidents indicates that action must be taken. The Government have failed to address and recognise this issue. Remaining silent only emboldens the nation’s Islamophobes.

Critics have argued that the APPG’s report undermines the Government’s counter-terrorism efforts. I find that claim utterly disappointing. Indeed, the claim itself serves to fuel suspicion and hostility towards Muslims. Through a leaked letter to the Prime Minister, it has been revealed that the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council has expressed concerns over the APPG’s definition. The APPG’s definition aims to tackle Islamophobia, which ranges from hate crimes to discriminatory outcomes in employment, and access to goods and services. The allegation that that definition will prevent police forces and authorities from doing their daily work is extremely dangerous and has real consequences. It looks at the Muslim community only through the lens of security. I strongly urge the Prime Minister to publish the letter.
I welcome the chance to respond to this debate. There have been a number of powerful and important contributions. As several Members acknowledged, the shadow of what happened in New Zealand just two months ago is inescapable—people murdered while at prayer and so many lives devastated and tragically cut short. It was a senseless and shocking assault on New Zealand’s values of freedom, openness, democracy and decency—values that we all share. It was an act that I would describe as the epitome of evil. That is why it was right that as we grieved for those affected in mosques, synagogues, churches and other places of worship up and down the country, we reaffirmed our unity against all forms of hatred. We stood together with that sense of purpose against extremism and the false narratives that so often underpin it. We came together in love and solidarity, underlining not only our condemnation, in the strongest possible terms, of this attack, but the fact that all communities stand shoulder to shoulder with our Muslim brothers and sisters, because we know that an attack on one group is an attack on us all. To persecute anybody because of their race and religion goes against everything I believe we stand for as a country and underlines the need to tackle this hatred head on and the need to do more.

That is why the Government have taken steps to ensure that, for the first time, police forces are required to disaggregate religious hate crime data, to allow us to better identify anti-Muslim hatred. As a number of Members have underlined, that data has sadly revealed that Muslims are a commonly targeted religious group, accounting for over half of religiously motivated hate crime, and that the number of all religiously motivated hate crimes has gone up by 40% from 2016-17 to 2017-18. It is utterly unacceptable and deeply troubling for our Muslim neighbours, colleagues and friends to be living in fear, as so many Members have described.

No one should feel unsafe while practising their religion. No one should feel unsafe living in their community. That is why we doubled the places of worship fund to £1.6 million, to physically protect mosques and other places of worship and reassure communities, and are making it easier for people to apply for the funding from July 2019. In addition, we have announced a new £5 million fund to provide security training for places of worship and a consultation on what more can be done to protect faith communities. There is nothing more important than keeping people safe and ensuring that they feel safe.

As well as doing more to protect vulnerable communities, we must get a firmer grip on the nature of the bigotry they face, which I believe means creating a formal definition of Islamophobia to strengthen that. I am grateful for the input of Members across the House and their work on this important issue and hope that today’s debate acts as a further step of progress. I note in particular the incredibly valuable work undertaken by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims to develop a definition of Islamophobia. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for leading that work. I hope, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said in his foreword, that the APPG’s report “can give all of us food both for thought and positive action.”

The Muslim population have genuine concerns over their safety and security following recent events. During this holy month of Ramadan, funding for security at places of worship will be vital and I welcome the steps taken by the Home Secretary.

Let us remind ourselves that the reason the APPG created this definition was the Government’s sheer reluctance to adopt a formal definition of Islamophobia in the first place. Whether we look at the evidence from the Ruby McGregor-Smith review or the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), we are confronted with the fact that Islamophobia has damaging consequences for the life chances and equalities enjoyed by our British Muslim communities. The APPG’s inquiry was set up to do something about the nature and scale of Islamophobia and its impact on British Muslim communities—and doing something is what we, as the Labour party, are committed to.

I sincerely hope that this debate does not warrant a predictable and rehearsed response from the Government. The Government do not need to reinvent the wheel. This definition already has cross-party support and the confidence of hundreds of organisations. The Prime Minister claimed with such conviction that she condemns any form of discrimination and Islamophobia. I urge the Government to translate that conviction into action and the opposite of that shared drive for inclusion and understanding—confronting Islamophobia. Some of the examples that have been provided here today have been utterly shocking. At the heart of this debate is the intent to stand against those who would cause hatred or intimidate towards, or make threats against, our Muslim brothers and sisters, and the false narratives that underpin or give succour to this.

Hon. Members have commented on social media, the press and other issues. It is right that we reflect on some of the powerful contributions that have been made.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

James Brokenshire: I hope my hon. Friend will understand if I say that he has not been part of the debate and I am slightly tight on time.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The holy month of Ramadan marks one of the most sacred times for Muslims across the country and across the world. So let me start by wishing Members of this House, and others observing this period, Ramadan kareem. I know that in the coming days many Members across the House will be attending iftars—events that bring people and communities together, and celebrate the values that we are making it easier for people to apply for the funding for security at other places of worship and reassure communities, and are making it easier for people to apply for the funding from July 2019. In addition, we have announced a new £5 million fund to provide security training for places of worship and a consultation on what more can be done to protect faith communities. There is nothing more important than keeping people safe and ensuring that they feel safe.

As well as doing more to protect vulnerable communities, we must get a firmer grip on the nature of the bigotry they face, which I believe means creating a formal definition of Islamophobia to strengthen that. I am grateful for the input of Members across the House and their work on this important issue and hope that today’s debate acts as a further step of progress. I note in particular the incredibly valuable work undertaken by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims to develop a definition of Islamophobia. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for leading that work. I hope, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said in his foreword, that the APPG’s report “can give all of us food both for thought and positive action.”
The APPG's work makes an important and—I underline—serious contribution to how best to tackle bigotry, division and the pernicious narratives within our communities.

The issue of the definition was discussed at a roundtable on Islamophobia that I chaired on 5 March with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, where members of our anti-Muslim hatred working group and expert stakeholders such as the Runnymede Trust and the Commission for Countering Extremism shared their views. It is vital that we get this right and that any definition reflects the experiences of those who have experienced hatred because they are Muslim; that we are satisfied that it will have the positive effect it sets out to achieve—a point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood)—and do no harm; and that it commands broad support within communities and wider society.

The APPG definition, with the best of intent, does not yet meet those criteria, and further work and consideration are needed; I frame it in those terms. The proposal defines Islamophobia as "a type of racism". I am in no doubt that racism forms a part of the bigotry that we need to confront, but combining race and religion within the definition causes legal and practical issues. As a starting point, it is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race as comprising colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins, none of which would necessarily encompass a Muslim or Islamic practice. There are potential consequences for freedom of speech. I recognise, as stated in the report, that that was not the intention behind the recommendation. There is also the issue of how we address sectarian hatred. I will reflect on how we can best respond to that, so that we are moving this issue forward.

It is clear that we must interrogate this complex issue further as matter of urgency. The Home Affairs Committee is undertaking a review into the issue, but the Government need to do more. That is why we will appoint two advisers. We will ensure that that reflects the need for community representation and drives the process forward, building on the important work already undertaken by the anti-Muslim hatred working group, and other bodies, which will remain central to our efforts to engage with Muslim communities. Our priority is to arrive swiftly at a collective position that strengthens our resolve when tackling anti-Muslim hatred and challenging the false narratives that underpin it, and we must reflect on and respond to the strength of feeling that we have heard in the House this afternoon.

I know there is more work to do, and we must do everything in our power to stand up for our diverse, tolerant and vibrant society. In so doing, we must stand up for our Muslim friends, and for all communities that face hatred and bigotry. In the immortal and incredibly powerful words of Jo Cox, there is so much more that unites us than divides us, and I hope that Members across the House will go forward in that spirit to make Islamophobia, and all forms of hate, a thing of the past.

3.31 pm

Wes Streeting: This has been a wide-ranging and largely thoughtful debate, but the critical thing that people will now look to us for is action. We will engage seriously with the Secretary of State, as he has engaged seriously with our arguments. Clearly, there are points of disagreement that we need to work through, not just as legislators but with communities up and down the country. I say gently, however, that as he goes about that work, he must do so with a degree of self-awareness about the Government's position and the way that they are perceived among Muslim communities. I say with some reflection and humility from the Labour Benches, that I genuinely believe that the Government have no more credibility to define Islamophobia than the Labour party had to redefine antisemitism—that is how bad the politics of this place have sunk in the eyes of so many people up and down the country. I believe that we can and must make progress, and today's debate has helped us start to do that with, as the Secretary of State said, some urgency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.
International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia

3.32 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate at such an appropriate time, given that the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia is tomorrow, and was also marked by the House last year.

In previous debates, including last year, I spoke about how LGBT+ rights are now a tale of two worlds. A year on, it is worth recapping where the world has gone forward, and also where it has gone backwards. Seventy countries still criminalise homosexuality, or at least sexual acts between men, and 45 of those also criminalise sexual acts between women. Only 42 states actively protect against hate crimes based on sexual orientation, and 11 countries still carry the death penalty as a maximum punishment for LGBT conduct. Only three countries in the world—Brazil, Ecuador and Malta—have nationwide bans on conversion therapy, and we have seen alarming reverses of LGBT rights in countries such as Armenia, Brunei, Chechnya, Tanzania and Turkey. I will come on to those issues shortly.

In September last year in India, section 377 of the penal code, which prohibited same-sex intimacy as against the order of nature—doubtless a legacy of the UK’s laws—was struck down by the Supreme Court of India after a case was brought by a coalition of civil society groups. Homosexuality is now effectively decriminalised in this major country, although it is also true that there are no legal protections against discrimination. This is a momentous decision, because the Indian penal code was used as a template in other former colonies. There is a huge role for the UK to play in supporting legal cases against those colonial laws for which we have an historic responsibility elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am exceedingly grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this very important debate. As we celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia and show proudly that we stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, does he agree with me that it is horrifying and deplorable that hate crime against the community here in the UK has been on the rise? Between 2016 and 2018, police-recorded hate crime based on sexual orientation and gender equality increased by 27% and 32% respectively.

Nick Herbert: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the rise in hate crime in this country. While the UK does so much to promote LGBT+ rights abroad, we must remember that there is work still to do in our own country. I will come to that.

I want to talk about the reverses in LGBT+ rights seen elsewhere in the world, some of which are really serious. In Tanzania in November last year, LGBT activists were forced into hiding in Dar es Salaam after officials announced a taskforce to identify and punish gay people. In the same month, there were police arrests at a same-sex ceremony in Zanzibar. The national Government in Tanzania has refused to intervene in worrying provincial crackdowns, following a ban on NGOs that had been distributing contraception and outreach to control the spread of HIV/AIDS.
There have been other crackdowns on private events, meetings and roundtables convened to ensure HIV advocacy. That development, seen in Tanzania, in other African countries and in Asian countries, is worrying because it interferes with the important global public health agenda to tackle HIV/AIDS. If some of our most discriminated-against and marginalised groups are oppressed in that way, we will make it harder to ensure that they have access to treatment. The concern is not just about human rights, important though that is. It is also about effective global healthcare programmes. That gives us a second and important reason to be concerned about the discriminatory policies and practices in these countries.

Notoriously, earlier this year Brunei announced that it would apply sharia law, which would impose the death sentence for homosexual conduct between men. There was an outcry, with action by civil society and business boycotts. It was discussed in this House, and I know the Government took action at a diplomatic level to persuade the Sultan of Brunei that enforcement of this sharia law was completely inappropriate for a modern country. It is therefore good that the Sultan announced that the death penalty moratorium will be extended for these offences, but it is important to say that that is not good enough. The status quo ante is restored for that specific offence, but that still leaves in place sharia law for other offences. Frankly, we should not welcome that as an advance when all that happened was, following an international outcry, the leadership in Brunei, buckling under pressure, were required to reverse a terrible announcement.

While that sharia law remains in place, despite what the Government have said about signing up to conventions on torture, it remains a huge concern that we see, in this country and others, increasing pressure on LGBT+ people with religion used as a pretext. We must stand up for the universality of human rights and say it is wrong to have such offences, which should not be on any kind of statute book. They certainly should not be enforced.

In Armenia, incredibly, Members of Parliament called for a trans activist to be burned alive after she addressed their Parliament’s human rights committee last month. In Turkey, Istanbul pride was cancelled and last week in Ankara 75 LGBT+ activists were arrested and are currently awaiting release.

In the debate last year, Members raised the brutal treatment of gay men in Chechnya. We expressed concern about the fact that the Russian Government had not done enough to crack down on that terrible treatment of gay people. There was meant to be an independent inquiry and there was meant to be a report, but nothing effective has happened.

Worse still, since our debate there has been a further crackdown. There have been reports that at least 40 people in Chechnya, presumed to be LGBT+, were detained in concentration camps and tortured, and that there were at least two deaths. Human Rights Watch has reported that it interviewed four men who were detained for between three and 20 days between December 2018 and February this year at the Grozny Internal Affairs Department compound. Police officials there kicked them with booted feet, beat them with sticks and polypropylene pipes, and tortured three of the four with electric shocks. One man was raped with a stick. There have even been murders of gay men by the authorities in Chechnya.

What have the Russian Government done to condemn that and to assure the global community that such activities will not be permitted in future in the state for which they have responsibility? Russia is a member of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the European convention on human rights. It is absolutely intolerable that it should permit such brutal treatment of any section of the community—in any state for which it has responsibility. The message must go from this House to the Russian Government, loud and clear, that we will not accept these egregious breaches of human rights, that we and the global community will hold the Russian Government to account, and that we will not stop raising this issue until they do something about it.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Excellent organisations such as Stonewall have highlighted what has been going on in Chechnya—just as he has done—for three years. Does he agree that, while it is good that our Government are condemning it, they must continue to put pressure on the Russian authorities in calling for an immediate end to these atrocities, and also join in the demand for an independent investigation?

Nick Herbert: Yes, I do agree. There needs to be an independent investigation of these terrible atrocities.

I will end my speech shortly because I know that many other Members on both sides of the House wish to speak.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Herbert: I will make a fraction more progress, if my hon. Friend will allow me.

Let me raise two further key issues. The first relates to how we respond. I shall leave it to the Minister to set out the many ways in which the Government have used their resources of soft power and, indeed, funding to ensure that groups around the world can promote LGBT+ rights. We must commend them for that, but we must ensure that the funding is sustained. Few countries in the world are in a stronger position than the United Kingdom, because of our own record on human rights, because of what we have achieved in our own country, and because of the soft power that we are able to exercise globally and in organisations such as the Commonwealth, to promote LGBT+ rights on the world stage. I congratulate the Government on taking many initiatives in this respect, but those initiatives must be sustained.

The Government will shortly assume the co-chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition, a nascent intergovernmental organisation to promote LGBT+ rights, along with the Argentine Government. I urge the Minister and his ministerial colleagues in other Departments—including the Defence Secretary, who is responsible for equalities, the Foreign Secretary, and the new Secretary of State for International Development—to note the importance of that chairmanship and of the conference that we will hold next year and to ensure that sufficient resources are committed to that for a very important period. It is an opportunity for the UK to lead in this area, but that initiative requires greater co-ordination, greater organisation and dedicated resources.
Mark Menzies: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work in leading today’s debate and for shining a spotlight on many other occasions on corners of the world where LGBT people have been facing genuine hardship. May we, and in particular the Minister, use this opportunity to urge on countries that have been quite progressive on this but where we have seen some slippage—I reflect particularly on Cuba, where organisations such as Cenesex, which was led by Mariela Castro, drove LGBT rights but where only last weekend the LGBT march in Havana was outlawed and disrupted and people face arrest, and on Paraguay and Brazil, where we are hearing similar mood music, with LGBT rights slipping back? It is important that we support our friends to do the right thing.

Nick Herbert: I agree.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about this country showing leadership. Last year, the World Health Organisation removed the classification of gender dysphoria as a mental illness, which was an important step forward and no doubt happened in part thanks to pressure from the UK. But the application process for gender recognition certificates in this country is still largely based on the conception that gender dysphoria is an illness. I have written to the Minister for Women and Equalities, who I believe also happens at present to be Foreign Secretary—

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey): Defence Secretary.

Sandy Martin: Defence Secretary. I apologise; I lose track of who is who—as I am sure Ministers do as well. Will we see movement on this to ensure that we really are track of who is who—as I am sure Ministers do as well.

Nick Herbert: That should be our ambition for the world as well.

Sandy Martin: I am especially proud to have been a part of the Labour movement that recognised at its Bournemouth conference in 1986 that LGBT people needed particular protection after the oppression visited upon them by the odious section 28. That disgraceful and overtly discriminatory measure was put on the statute book by the Thatcher Government, egged on by the red-top tabloids in full cry. It effectively singled out LGBT people as a threat in our schools, treated them as though they were alien and delegitimised their very existence in law by referring to their relationships as “pretend”. It caused untold misery and suffering.

As the first openly out lesbian Minister in any UK Government, I was very proud indeed to have been part of a Labour Government who largely achieved equality in law for LGBT people during their 13 years in office. Indeed, the civil partnership legislation normalised LGBT relationships by granting legal protections equating to marriage. These were landmark social reforms, but their achievement was not inevitable. Positive change was not accomplished easily. Each reform was hard fought and resisted by the very forces that had given birth to section 28 in the first place. Eliminating discrimination against LGBT people in UK law required heavy political lifting. It was undertaken out of conviction and it carried considerable political risk at the time, even if it seems in retrospect that it was all straightforward. I got fed up of seeing the Labour Government I was part of characterised in the tabloids as being obsessed with LGBT rights or seeing us being lampooned as being run by a “gay mafia”. Section 28 was not repealed easily, as those of us who were there will attest. It took three years to get it through the House of Lords, and the Conservatives fought tooth and nail to keep it. Equalising the age of consent was not achieved easily. Each reform was hard fought and resisted by the very forces that had given birth to section 28 in the first place.

We have a common objective. It was very well expressed by the Prime Minister in her foreword to the “LGBT Action Plan” that the UK Government published last year. She said she wanted to make the UK “a country where no one feels the need to hide who they are or who they love”.

That should be our ambition for the world as well.

Several hon. Members rose—
completely here and certainly not in the rest of the world, as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said. IDAHO day calls on us to contemplate the work we still need to do to ensure that our LGBTQI sisters and brothers across the globe are able to achieve their own liberation from discrimination and bigotry.

That moment is a long way off, however, when we realise that 70 countries still criminalise same-sex relationships and that this involves the potential application of the death penalty in 11 of them. Stonewall’s international work shows that one quarter of the world’s population still believe that being LGBTQI should be a crime. LGBTQI people are losing their lives as a result of the bigotry and violence directed against them; it is estimated that there is a killing every two days.

So while we have seen the forces of progress advance in recent years, there is still much work to be done. We cannot and must not be complacent about what has been achieved, because we are in an era of backlash, and that should remind us that things can go backwards and that rights, once achieved, can be taken away. In 2019, the warning lights are flashing. The 2019 Rainbow Europe list shows that LGBTQI rights are even going backwards in Europe for the first time in 10 years. As the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, Turkey is failing to uphold fundamental civil rights, and Bulgaria has repealed a law allowing trans people to change their names and gender. Poland has made it harder for lesbians to access reproductive rights. Everywhere, the rise of the far right is threatening work to counter bigotry and discrimination against LGBTQI people and in some cases it is reversing gains already made.

The far right use the politics of hatred and resentment to foster blame against identified groups of people whom they can scapegoat for all society’s ills. They are organised globally and they often adopt similar tactics, wherever they appear. Call them right-wing populists, call them the alt-right; they are hostile to difference and the LGBTQI community is suffering because of it. Poland is accelerating in its most reprehensible forms. It must be exposed and opposed.

The right of individuals to be who they want to be—to be who they love, to love who they want to love, to form the relationships we want to form and to create a family where they could be sentenced to death for their sexuality. Freedom from that fear is the most important event of my life.

I am a social liberal. For me, freedom starts with the right of individuals to be who they want to be—to be who we want to be, to love who we want to love, to form the relationships we want to form and to create a family and home to share that love with others. I will no longer be party to a society where that is not possible.

Here in the United Kingdom, many of us now enjoy unprecedented freedom. There were 7,019 marriages between same-sex couples in 2016. In 2018, one in eight adoptions in the UK were by couples in a same-sex relationship, a civil partnership or a same-sex marriage. Furthermore, as the hon. Lady said, there are now, I believe, 45 Members who publicly identify as LGBT.

That said, there are many whose plight is only just beginning to be recognised, and here I will deal with the trans community. In July 2018, the Government Equalities Office published the national LGBT community survey. Of the 108,100 valid responses to the survey, 40% of people said they had experienced a negative incident in the previous 12 months involving someone they did not know. Of the 200,000 transgender people in the UK, this
means that an avoidable death is a threatening reality for many in our community—for our very friends and family.

Out of these 200,000 trans people in the UK, only 4,910 have been issued with a gender recognition certificate since the Gender Recognition Act 2004 came into force. The GRA enables trans men and women to update their legal gender by applying for that certificate, which allows them to change their gender and, if they wish, their name. It is required by trans people if they are to be recognised, legally and officially, as male or female. The Act was groundbreaking at the time but is now out of date. The process of obtaining a gender recognition certificate is intrusive, bureaucratic and medicalised. It also fails to make provision for non-binary people.

In 2017, the Government announced a welcome reform of the Act to streamline and de-medicalise the process, and after much delay the results are being analysed. I look forward to an update from the Minister on when these results will be published, along with plans for next steps. It would be a welcome conclusion to this debate. I can only hope it will help everyone to understand that being transgender, or indeed lesbian, gay, bisexual or intersex, is not a lifestyle choice but usually an agonising realisation that no one would choose to go through. Accepting this crucial clarification is perhaps the biggest step towards ending aggression towards the LGBTI community.

That begins with education. My own choice had been to hide and to disguise myself. It was not until I got here that I understood enough about myself and everything else that I eventually found the courage to be open and to be myself. Education—the knowledge that it is not a matter of choice about who you innately are—is the cause that has to be won. The latest furore against the values of the Equality Act 2010 at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham was a stark reminder to us all of not only how far we have to go, but how easily we will backtrack on progress if we are not careful.

We have strong protections in Britain. The Equality Act is clear that people can be of different race, religion, disability and sexual orientation. This is non-negotiable. Homophobia exists, in part, because of a lack of education, and inclusive religious and sexual education is a cornerstone of ensuring that our children grow up to be some of the most well-rounded, inclusive, understanding and tolerant people in the world. We must remember and protect that.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech. Is there not some irony—I use the word carefully—here? The weekend gone, I went to the East Lothian Pride Saltire festival. It was a gathering of the LGBTI community, along with friends, families and communities of East Lothian. Since I had the honour of becoming an MP, I have not attended a more welcoming, open, friendly, inclusive gathering of people. The irony is that the prejudice is all one-sided.

Crispin Blunt: Obviously, I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

It must be a central characteristic of global Britain, with our people, culture and history, that if we as a nation do not understand difference at home, we undermine what is special about the United Kingdom abroad. People who dislike the idea of people with different sexual orientations may have children or grandchildren who do not conform to their social norms. In fact, statistically, of course they will. There are children who have two fathers, and there are children who have two mothers. There are children who are gay. Those are facts.

All children need education on what Britain is like and what Britain stands for, which is tolerance and inclusivity. Pretending that such people do not exist only serves to misinform and continue the bullying of these children. Education is a prime opportunity for the Government to step up and champion LGBT rights. It is a duty. Backing teachers who teach and promote equality should not be a hard ask. Indeed, if a group of people demanded that their children should not learn about physics, history or British values because they believed that was wrong, we would not be having this discussion.

I will close by showing that there is light at the end of this tunnel. The decision in India was the most momentous for the most enormous number of people, but it has been accompanied by change in places such as Angola and Trinidad and Tobago, where laws criminalising same-sex acts have been repealed. I commend the work of the Commonwealth Equality Network. When people stand up together to challenge exclusion, they can achieve great things. As part of Britain’s place in the Commonwealth, we need to continue to support LGBT people globally and ensure that the British values of inclusivity, tolerance and respect reverberate around the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I made a plea for equality, but it did not work, so we will now have a formal time limit of five minutes.

4.11 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): We rightly acknowledge—especially those of us who are a little older—just how much freer and fairer our society has become for LGBTIQI people in a short time. We usually do not stop to think that if equality has come so far and so fast, it could be eroded just as quickly. We cannot stop building solidarity around gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability and class. This is about not just policies, but exchanging stories and coming to understand each other better. Our mission is to resist those who spread lies, fear and division, and to keep on with positive conversations about who we are, how we are different and how we are the same.

I will concentrate on just three issues on which the Government’s response must be stronger. First, I want to know when we are going to get moving on reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. No matter how difficult the debate, we have to find the courage to help some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Secondly, I want to know why PrEP is not being rolled out to absolutely everyone who needs it without delay, because it raises the genuine hope that we can end HIV transmission entirely. That is incredibly exciting, so why are we not acting faster? Thirdly, I want to know why our Government are not treating President Bolsonaro of Brazil as the active threat to LGBTIQI people that he clearly is, and I need to speak strongly on that issue.
Bolsonaro has used homophobic slurs as weapons against his political opponents, straight and LGBTQI alike, over and again. He has repeated the incredibly damaging lie that LGBT parents are child abusers. He has repeated the lie that young people are recruited into being LGBT by activists who are simply in pursuit of sex. Just last month, he presented gay tourists, including British citizens, as a threat to Brazilian families. He has already acted to remove the responsibility to protect the rights of LGBT Brazilians from the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights in a country where more than 100 trans people, and many more queer folk, are murdered every single year.

Most despicably, Bolsonaro is a man who has encouraged parents to beat their children if they do not conform, who has explicitly endorsed violence against gay couples on the streets, and who has said repeatedly that he would prefer his sons to die rather than be gay—he would prefer them to be run over by a truck. This is a man who took a smiling selfie with his neighbour, the police officer charged with murdering the heroic bisexual councillor Marielle Franco last year. She was murdered for her human rights activism, and Bolsonaro alone refused to condemn her murder.

I want to finish by mentioning one specific case among many hundreds. In 2014, after Bolsonaro had made his comments about beating children who are not acting in line with their parents’ gender expectations, an eight-year-old boy was murdered by his father near Rio. He was beaten because he liked having long hair, because he liked to dance, because he tried on his sister’s clothes and because he liked helping to wash the dishes. Because he did not fit, his father beat him until he was dead. I can only conclude that Bolsonaro would have approved. He appears to me to be a vicious misogynist, transphobe and homophobe, and a clear danger to LGBTQI Brazilians and visitors alike. I think him reprehensible.

I want to hear the Government tell the truth about Bolsonaro and tell me what action they are going to take to oppose this evil. That is the very least we can do for that murdered child and so many other LGBTQI people who are living in absolute fear in Brazil today.

4.16 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I wanted to speak in this debate to add my voice to those who are rightly celebrating sexual orientation and gender identity diversity on Friday 17 May all over the world. I also wanted personally to support my excellent parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who has done so much work, in this House and around the world, to raise awareness of and campaign on the issue.

I am proud that the UK is a leader in the field of LGBTQI equality, but much more progress is needed to ensure that we all live in an open and tolerant society. We are making good progress in this place, as we have the highest number of LGBT MPs elected to a Parliament. The Conservative party is also making great progress. I remember knocking on doors a few years ago when many people were concerned about gay marriage, but when I asked a recent open meeting of Conservative members in my constituency how many of them were concerned about gay marriage, only two people put their hands up, and even they did so very reluctantly. Attitudes are changing. They take a long time to change, but when they change they change very quickly. What we have heard today is evidence of that.

One of the most worrying statistics I have heard recently comes from Stonewall, which says that more than one third of LGBT+ staff do not feel confident enough to come out in their place of work. The figure for trans staff members is higher, at 51%. Given that many more people feel safe to come out at university or even at school, it is a concern that people feel that they have to go back into the closet at work. This should be a wake-up call to everybody who has responsibility for managing a place of work.

We need people to bring their best and most confident self to work. The fact that so many LGBT+ staff members do not feel comfortable being out at work means that companies and we as a country are losing out. How so? We know from academic studies that diverse organisations are more successful than those that are not. They make better decisions because they get a wider range of inputs. They are more in touch with their stakeholders, customers and employees. In short, discrimination costs us dearly, not just because of the harm it does to the individual concerned, but because it prevents people from being at their very best by simply being themselves.

Discrimination is harmful not only to the individual concerned, but to society as a whole. Discrimination has unpleasant companions, namely bullying and self-harm. Bullying is not only distressing and isolating; it can also affect education and damage mental health. It is welcome that we are now investing £3 million to help primary and secondary schools across the country to eradicate this type of bullying. According to the Trevor Project, each episode of LGBTQI victimisation, whether physical or verbal harassment, increases the likelihood of self-harming behaviour by two and a half times on average. LGBTQI youth are almost five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. That is just not okay.

I was really pleased with the creation of a LGBT support group in Chichester, which started in February. I spoke to the group in preparing for this debate after being told about it by one of my own party members, Christopher Baldock. The support group was set up by Melissa Hamilton, a local trans woman. Growing up as trans she was met with a wall of apathy, and she found there were no adult services to support her. She told me that a common response was, “Why don’t you just head to Brighton?” I am delighted that she stayed in Chichester and set this group up.

Justine Greening: I would love to network with her with the Wandsworth LGBT Forum, which, similarly, has been well-established for many years, has brilliant people involved in it and does fantastic work in our local community. I am sure they could help my hon. Friend’s LGBT community to get further, faster with the support they can provide locally.

Gillian Keegan: That is brilliant and I will definitely take my right hon. Friend up on that offer, and I am sure Melissa will be delighted.

Another story I heard was from two girls who had gone to Brighton to celebrate Pride. They went back home on the train, still wearing their rainbow colours,
which we have all got on today. While they were walking home, a car full of young men hurled homophobic abuse at them as they drove past. The car then turned around for another drive-by insult. This incident was, understandably, distressing, but we are so much better than this and we need to call it out wherever we see it.

The group is already up and running, and I am sure it will go much faster now thanks to the help and support from my right hon. Friend. It allows the LGBT community in Chichester to come together for the first time, to share their stories and experiences and to support one another. Without this support, it is so easy to feel isolated and unable to be yourself. I will join the group at one of its future get-togethers and look forward to meeting everyone in person.

Of course, this Friday is also a day when we draw attention to the issue of LGBTIQ rights internationally. Our country is a leader in the world, much respected for our influence and the example we set. I am proud that it was a Conservative Prime Minister who put same-sex marriage on the statute book, but, as many colleagues have said, there is much to be done in the wider Commonwealth countries. I was particularly disappointed to see what was happening in Bermuda, which still seems to have a problem with LGBT rights. I mention Bermuda as my husband is the grandson of a Gosling, a very well-known Bermudian family, famous for Gosling’s Rum. One would think that a wealthy and important British overseas territory would take a more enlightened and tolerant approach, and I call on it to do so.

In conclusion, I want to thank my colleagues who have enabled us to have this important debate today. We are making progress in Chichester and across the country. I am looking forward to working across the House, as a straight ally, to ensure we continue to be an open, tolerant society that stands firmly against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, both now and in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We have to reduce the time limit to four minutes. I am sorry, but that is just how it is.

4.22 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to talk about the hope and promise of change, how far we have come and how far we still have to go. At a time of rising, rampaging populism across Europe and across other democracies around the world, and throughout the tyrannies of the world, it is important to remember that there is so much that we have none the less achieved and that the country we live in today is so much better than the one I was born into. That is largely because in this place openly gay politicians such as myself stand on the shoulders of giants—the giants who forced through legislative change in this place, not just by walking through the Division Lobby, but by marching through the streets demanding change. I am talking about those great social movements that have managed to change not just the laws of the land, but the hearts and minds of the people living in it.

One of the reasons the LGBT community was so disturbed by the protests at school gates around the country accusing gay people of proselytising to children, wanting to convert them and sexualising them is that the horror of section 28 rings so heavily in the our memories. For young people who have gone through school without having to endure section 28, it has come as a shock—that realisation that the rights we have won and that have been fought for can be rolled back. For the older generations who founded organisations such as Stonewall to undo the damage of section 28, it was a reminder that there are battles that we thought were won but that can easily return. For those of us who stand somewhere in the middle, we recognise the heavy burden of responsibility we bear not only to defend the rights we already have, but to extend the freedoms even further.

I took hope from what Imam Ibrahim Mogra said last night on “Newsnight”. There is no doubt that he is a devout believer in his own faith, and I suspect he has traditional views on human sexuality, but on “Newsnight” he said this about homosexuality:

“It’s something you don’t choose into or opt out of.”

He also said that “if there is a child who comes to school with two mummies or two daddies it’s only right that his”—or her—“classmates know about this. That would reduce bullying and discrimination.”

What a great message of hope, respect and inclusion.

The journey that the Conservative party has been on has already been referred to. I pay tribute to Conservatives who fought from within to change their party’s position on LGBT equality, meaning that I could march through the Division Lobby to support, for example, measures to extend compulsory sex and relationships education. I pay tribute to those people who are still fighting battles—for example, Alison Bennington in the Democratic Unionist party. She is the first openly gay DUP candidate. Whatever we think of the DUP’s politics, we certainly need more Alison Benningtons and fewer of the likes of Jim Wells.

I say to all of us in this House that there is still unfinished business. It is an absurdity that Northern Ireland is the only place on the island of Ireland and within the British Isles where marriage equality is not enjoyed by everybody. I am appalled that the trans debate has been conducted in an atmosphere of such vicious intolerance, with abuse and threats of violence traded from one side to the other. That is not the way to approach what must be a sensitive and thoughtful debate and consequent action. We have already heard expressed so eloquently the powerful role that this country has to play in undoing the damage in countries around the world where LGBT people are persecuted, often as a result of the House’s colonial legacy.

Finally, as I consider tying the knot, I hope that one day, like my dear friends Ann Limb and Maggie Cook, who married this weekend in a Quaker ceremony, my own church might bless my marriage, even if it does not take place in a church.

4.26 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this much-needed debate to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.
This year, 2019, marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of Stonewall. Its founders had been active in the fight against section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. I welcome the new legislation that the House passed just a few weeks ago to extend relationship and sex education to include LGBTI issues. The backlash that we saw against LGBTI-inclusive education has faint but highly worrying echoes of the repressive section 28 from the 1980s. It is truly shameful that two in five LGBTI pupils between the ages of 11 and 19 are never taught anything about LGBTI issues in school. That does not create a healthy atmosphere in which LGBTI pupils feel they can talk to an adult about being LGBTI in school, and we know that being able to do so dramatically increases the mental wellbeing of LGBTI students.

The changes to RSE have taken too long to happen, and we cannot wait another 33 years for urgent reforms to be made. To start with, urgent reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 need to be made sooner, rather than later. To put it in simple terms, transgender women are women. A reformed Gender Recognition Act needs to be committed to de-medicalising the process. The Government have consistently made it clear that being trans is not a mental illness, and the Act needs to be reformed to truly recognise that. Currently, transgender individuals must provide medical evidence from a mental health professional, with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, before their gender is recognised. The Government themselves predict that just 12% of trans people in the UK have a gender recognition certificate. There are too many barriers in place that stop trans people from getting gender recognition certificates, which has meant that although new legislation has been introduced to improve the lives of trans people, the majority of trans people have not benefited from that legislation.

It is important that the House recognises that this is Mental Health Awareness Week. It is important that we acknowledge that in this debate because of the vast amount of research that suggests that LGBTI youth are more likely to struggle with their mental health. Today’s LGBTI youth generally come out at younger ages, and public support for LGBTI issues has dramatically increased in recent years, but we must ask ourselves why LGBTI youth continue to have significantly higher rates of depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation than their cisgender/heterosexual counterparts.

I am proud to represent a party that has done so much for LGBTI rights in the UK, including through the repeal of section 28, the introduction of civil partnerships and the reduction of the age of consent for men in same-sex relationships to 16. In one of my first surgeries after I was elected as a Member of Parliament, a constituent came to see me about his status as a European citizen. It truly upset me that this constituent, who was in a same-sex relationship, told me that part of his anxieties about his immigration status were to do with him not feeling safe if he had to return home.

I am deeply concerned about the treatment of LGBTI people internationally. Very recently, we have seen the introduction of the death penalty in Brunei for men who choose to sleep with other men. Both nationally and internationally, we have to do better. Together we can create a world where men are not afraid to love one another, where women are not afraid to love one another and where trans people can live safely. But to do that, cisgender and heterosexual people need to stand alongside our LGBTI citizens and not speak over them on this massively important issue. I know that, together, we can overcome homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

4.30 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I want to start by saying that I am very proud that Scotland is one of the world’s leading LGBTI+ rights countries in the world, and I am proud that I and the Scottish Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in particular.

I know that I am not alone in feeling that ignorance is rearing its ugly head again, but it is our job to make sure that we bring people with us. The reality is that most folk do not know a lot about trans people; they do not know a lot about trans issues; and they do not know a lot about the laws that we are seeking to reform. I want to use today as an opportunity to take a little heat out of such discussions and explain and answer some of the concerns that people have about the Gender Recognition Act and trans rights more broadly.

First, the Act provides a process for trans people to obtain a gender recognition certificate, which is basically the equivalent of a new birth certificate, but it reflects who that person is. To take part in this process, a person must pay a £140 fee; they must be over 18; they must not be married and if they are married spousal consent has to be given; they must have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria through medical and psychiatric reports; they must prove that they have lived fully for two years in their gender; and then they must present this dossier of evidence to a gender recognition panel, which we know from gathering evidence is a really redundant system and which asks a lot of totally inappropriate and irrelevant questions.

Let me talk about the problems with the GRA as it stands. First, not all folk can afford the £140 fee. That cost can be covered in instances of low income, but medical and psychiatric reports, which can cost an absolute bomb for a lot of people, are not covered. Then there is the idea that someone needs spousal consent if they are married. That is a medieval kind of rule. For someone to prove that they have lived for two years in a certain gender is as redundant as it is hypocritical. Action for Trans Health warned that this requirement can force trans people to conform to outdated norms of gender and behaviour. It also risks outing these individuals, because if they are challenged at some point in those two years, they do not have a gender recognition certificate and could therefore find themselves in a dangerous situation, so it is a totally unjustified ask.

Finally, the requirement of a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is absolutely ridiculous. The World Health Organisation removed trans gender from the international classification of diseases. Another look at this shows that it removed homosexuality only in 1992. Gender dysphoria is defined as distress or discomfort caused by a mismatch between gender identity and the identity assigned at birth. It is important to say that not every trans person experiences gender dysphoria. A comparable hypothetical situation would be if I had to go to a doctor and get a clinical diagnosis of anxiety or depression before someone believes that I am gay. Of course, a lot...
of gay people experience anxiety and depression in relation to their sexuality, but that is because of the way that the world treats us at the minute; it is not a medical consequence of being gay. The same is true of a trans gender person experiencing gender dysphoria.

The great thing about the Gender Recognition Act when it first came out in 2004 was that it recognised that not all trans people are physically or mentally prepared for surgery for a whole range of nuanced and different reasons. The everyday bigotry and ignorance experienced by trans people creates a vicious cycle of harassment and exclusion. I for one understand why many trans people are too emotionally exhausted to entertain this process to even get a GRC.

Under the reforms that have been put forward in Scotland—this place is looking at similar reforms—an individual would appear in person before a justice of the peace to make a statutory declaration confirming the truth of their application and their intention to live in their acquired gender for the remainder of their lives. The penalty for obtaining this by fraud would be two years in jail. This would bring us into line with international best practice, as we already see in Argentina, Malta, Norway, Denmark, Belgium and the Republic of Ireland.

No evidence from any of those countries suggests that the system is abused in any way.

The Scottish Government’s consultation ended in March 2018. There were 15,000 responses, all of which were overwhelmingly in support of the reforms. Close the Gap, Equate Scotland, Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid, Women 50:50 and Zero Tolerance support all these reforms and released a joint statement saying:

“We do not regard trans equality and women’s equality to contradict or be in competition with each other”.

To be clear, there are absolutely no suggestions that we should change the exclusion clause in the Equality Act 2010, and it is the Equality Act that deals with single-sex services, where a lot of the recent concerns that have been surfacing seem to lie. If anyone wants to look this up for research purposes, page 7 of the Equality Act states that exclusion clauses can be used where “a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim” can be shown.

It is important to follow that by saying that Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid already provide trans-inclusive services on the basis of self-ID, and have done so for well over a decade. They appreciate that trans women are running from the same abuse, the same toxic masculinity, and the same sexual and physical violence as other women they serve. We hear concerns such as, “What if an abusive male partner turns up to a refuge centre and starts self-identifying as a woman?” Well, the reality is that they would be treated in exactly the same way as an abusive lesbian partner turning up to a refuge. These questions already have answers. People have a right to express legitimate concerns and questions, but what I am saying just now is that either we are witnessing an open attack on rights that are already established and long have been, or we are seeing a worrying level of ignorance.

The only people responsible for abuse are abusers. We understand that men perpetrate more abuse against women, and we have to understand this trend if we want to challenge it, but that does not legitimise framing discussions on trans rights from the viewpoint that trans women are a threat. It is the same tactic used by the far right. For example, the far right portrays sexual crimes by Muslim men as endemic, yet ignores the fact that most rapists and paedophiles are actually white men. We hear arguments that we cannot have a compassionate social security system because benefits scroungers will just cheat and abuse the system, when the truth is that that does not actually happen a lot. The bigger problem is people not claiming what they are entitled to. Fake stories or individual cases are used to smear entire communities, against wider evidence. The same thing regularly happens to the trans community, and it is happening just now.

For me, being a feminist means dismantling the patriarchy. That patriarchy has hurt every different identity in society in different ways — whether in all the battles that feminists have been fighting on women’s behalf for generations, or in men not feeling able to talk about their mental health or to seek help because they cannot be seen as weak or vulnerable. Even within the LGB community, we see the harm that this patriarchy does. We see guys who feel the need to be effeminate because they are gay, or women—women who feel the need to become butch because they are lesbian. All these insecurities are instilled in people, and they play out in different ways.

We live in a highly gendered and patriarchal world. Many people fail to grasp that it is also an incredibly heterosexual and binary world, and this goes hand in hand with the patriarchy. It is quite telling that there seems to be little concern—certainly little vocal concern—for trans men and the situations that they might find themselves in. Being an LGBT ally is more than supporting our existence and rights in theory; rather, it is demonstrating and taking personal responsibility to educate ourselves to understand the everyday barriers and prejudices that we face. We have to find out why the general welfare of trans people is so awful, given that they make up less than 1% of the population. People are right to express legitimate questions and concerns, but if they dig deep enough, I think they will find that the answers are indeed there.

4.39 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the passionate speech by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) in support of the trans community. I sincerely thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing the debate. His very rounded speech ensured that the debate started in a way that updated us on the progress that has been made, and still needs to be made, globally. He also highlighted the legacy of the UK’s laws and our historical responsibility towards our former colonies. In fact, after he had finished speaking, I thought, “I haven’t really got much to say.”

It is with great pride that I take part in this debate. The theme for this year is justice and protection for all, and we really have to embrace that in its entirety. I always say that equality means equality. This month, on 24 May, we will be celebrating Stonewall’s 30 years of campaigning for LGBT+ people. Stonewall was formed a year and a day after the introduction of section 28—the legislation that prevented the so-called promotion of homosexuality in schools. It was formed by, among others, Lord Michael Cashman from the other place, Lisa Power and Sir Ian McKellen.
As we have heard, a lot has changed in the past 30 years, but there is still a lot of progress that needs to be made. We often talk about everybody bringing their true, authentic selves to work, yet there are still lots of people in this country and beyond who feel that they cannot do so. One equality does not trump another. You do not have to be gay to fight for gay rights; you just have to believe in equality. That might not come naturally to some—in fact, it may be hard, because they have to confront friends, family members, and even leaders of other countries. However, if that is what it takes to make people feel included, valued and worthy, then surely it is worth it.

The worrying rhetoric surrounding trans rights mirrors the dark early days of section 28 and has led to a spike in hate crimes against LGBT+ people. Members all around the House have said how important it is that we talk about and celebrate the LGBT+ community and the people who have led the way—like my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who was, as she said, the first openly gay Minister in a UK Government. We can be pretty sure that she was not the only gay Minister, but she was the first to be openly out. The struggle of those pioneers led to hard-won battles that now seem to be being rolled back.

Why is this important? The annual statistics from the Home Office show that between 2016-17 and 2017-18, police-recorded hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity increased by 27% and 32% respectively. Let me read out a couple of quotes. Ava, 56, from London said:

“Someone described their intention to slit my throat and kill me. They went on to say no court would convict them for killing ‘the queer bait’.”

Abebi, 35, from Scotland said:

“I was physically assaulted by two women as I attempted to use the bathroom in a bar. They began pushing me and shouted that I was in the wrong bathroom and pointed out that this was the ladies’ bathroom. I told them that I knew which bathroom it was and I was in the right place, but they persisted. Since then I avoid public toilets wherever possible.”

Can we imagine living our lives avoiding public toilets or walking down certain roads, in case we are attacked just because we are LGBT+?

The consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 has closed, but the Government have yet to publish the findings or respond. Many Members mentioned that. Today is a good day for the Minister to tell us more about the consultation, so that we can stop asking this question time and again.

The UK could be better allies. We have dropped from first to fourth to eighth in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association ratings. We need to support teachers in delivering the curriculum. The protests are growing around the country. We need to stop them in their tracks and ensure that teachers are properly supported, so that we can teach this in an informed and calm way. As the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, LGBT+ people are people, and children should be taught that we are different but equal.

According to 1 Corinthians, faith, hope and love are three things that people should abide by, “but the greatest of these is love.”

Martin Luther King said:

“It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important.”

This country should not support any other country where the LGBT+ community face death because of who they love. We should stand up and oppose that at every opportunity. Anybody who tries to turn love into hate cannot be supported. In our role as chair of the Commonwealth, the UK has an ideal opportunity to lead by example, to be a proper ally and to take a bold step and stand in solidarity with the LGBT+ community. The Government should put pressure on Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth nations to effectively repeal legislation that discriminates against LGBT+ people. The Government could also legislate for equal marriage in Northern Ireland and bring it in line with the rest of the UK. Almost 80% of people in Northern Ireland agree with that.

I would like to thank some people who have always informed me as the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities: LGBT Labour, Amnesty, Mermaids UK, Pride, Black Pride, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Kaleidoscope Trust.

At the end of the day, hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Just imagine a world where there is more love than hate. As legislators, and with the UK as chair of the Commonwealth, we are in a strong position to help make that a reality.

4.47 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and I pay tribute to his work on the APPG on global LGBT rights. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It is important for the world to hear the British Parliament speak out against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and in support of this year’s theme, “Justice and protection for all”.

It is important not to forget that, behind the labels that trip off the tongue so easily, we are talking about real people and those who are often subject to discrimination, abuse and, sadly, in so many countries across the world, much worse. I am very proud, so many years on from the event, to be speaking here as the first openly gay Conservative MP and the shadow Minister who helped to steer through the Civil Partnership Bill for the Conservative party.

This country has a very proud record of promoting equality for those who define themselves as LGBT. Indeed, we are recognised as one of the top 10 most progressive countries in Europe for such rights. We have one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world to prevent and tackle discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment.

We have heard powerful and moving speeches today but, as always, we recognise that there is more to do. In July last year, we launched the LGBT action plan, which set out 75 commitments and is supported by a £4.5 million fund to improve the lives of LGBT people in healthcare, education, the workplace and elsewhere. In the health sector, our £1 million LGBT health grant fund will back innovative proposals to tackle LGBT-related health inequality. Our new national LGBT health adviser, Dr Michael Brady, is working to improve LGBT people’s experiences throughout the healthcare sector.
We are also exploring options, including through existing legislation, to deliver on our commitment to end the abhorrent and prehistoric conversion therapy practices that some people disgustedly advocate. Such practices have no place in 21st-century Britain. Someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity is not something to be cured; it is something we should all celebrate.

In schools and universities, we are supporting LGBT work by students and teachers to improve tolerance and diversity in leadership, and we have made a further £1 million available to expand and extend an existing project to fight homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools—a phenomenon we should all condemn and that is totally unacceptable. In the workplace, we have launched a new £600,000 scheme to help to develop skills and capacity in the LGBT sector and we are working with the police to improve the response to LGBT hate crime incidents.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a real problem of homophobic bullying in the workplace and that often those best placed to deal with it are the trade unions? Will he say something about how his Government could assist trade unions in fighting the kind of discrimination that LGBT people face in the workplace every day?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is the duty of all people, be they managers or colleagues in the workplace, to stand up for anyone who may be discriminated against, and if a collective organisation of any sort in a company can assist an individual, I would wish it to be supported. We have nothing against trade unions doing things on that agenda in the workplace—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady gestures, but we would support any trade union endeavours to help to win the battle against discrimination and to protect individuals from bullying and inappropriate behaviour. I am proud that the UK Government are taking action in all those areas, as that shows our recognition of the extent to which the lives of LGBT people can still be improved, in order for them to be accorded the same dignity, respect and rights as all other citizens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) referred to the Gender Recognition Act 2004, as did the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), who made an excellent, powerful and very personal speech. Last year, we held a public consultation on the reform of that Act, which allows transgender people legally to change their gender. We are analysing more than 100,000 responses and we will publish the outcome later this year. A lot of those responses were extraordinarily personal and contained individual stories and experiences which, if we are to take the consultation seriously, we must understand and properly digest. It would be wrong to say, “We’ve had the consultation and here is what we will do,” because we must use that body of work powerfully to inform the provisions that we need to convert into public policy.

More broadly, and crucially for the delivery of our action plan, we have created an LGBT advisory panel, with experts from the LGBT sector, academia and the legal world, to ensure that we can engage with the latest research and hear from people working directly with those affected by these issues. As in so many areas of policy, change cannot be affected by Government alone. These partnerships with civil society are absolutely vital.

Wes Streeting: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am going to run out of time, so if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me I want to move on to the international dimension, which is more my field as a Foreign Office Minister and which I do not want to neglect in my response to the House.

In terms of our international approach, Members will be aware that promoting and defending human rights is an integral part of our foreign policy. That includes speaking up for gender equality and LGBT rights and seeking an end to discrimination wherever it occurs, as I did this year following yet more disturbing reports of persecution in Chechnya. We are clear that every country must fulfill its international human rights obligations. LGBT rights are not special or additional rights. They are not optional rights. They are human rights. They are the very same rights and fundamental freedoms that are enshrined in the UN charter and the universal declaration of human rights and that should be enjoyed by everyone. We are talking about the rights of families, friends, colleagues and neighbours. These are rights for all ages, all races and all faiths. We must be resolute in our campaigning and stand firm by our values.

In such cases, it is often our quiet diplomacy that reaps the most rewards. Where that does not work, we have no qualms about making our case in public. When Brunei implemented the Sharia penal code, we addressed our concerns in both public and private, particularly about the potential impact on LGBT people. Consequently, we warmly welcome the assurances provided by His Majesty the Sultan on 5 May. I hope that those who have been leading bans and boycotts of Brunei-owed equities fairly acknowledge those improvements and changes. We will continue to encourage Brunei to take further steps to protect LGBT people from all forms of discrimination.

We welcome the fact that India and Trinidad and Tobago decriminalised same-sex relations last year, but as we heard earlier today, it still remains a criminal offence in 70 countries, half of which are members of the Commonwealth. That statistic alone is a matter of great concern and regret. That is why it was vital to address the issue at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last year. I am delighted to report that it was the most progressive ever on LGBT rights.

I am going to skip over some things that I would like to say, as I am running out of time, but I want to refer quickly to the Equal Rights Coalition, which was mentioned earlier. I am delighted to announce that next month we will take on the co-chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition. It is a group of 40 countries that work together and share expertise to advance equality. It aims to co-ordinate international efforts to tackle violence and discrimination against LGBT people. It is a great pleasure that our partner will be Argentina. We have already worked closely and successfully with Argentina on a number of important issues and I look forward to this being another area of close collaboration. I hope that together we can re-energise the coalition.
I am confident that I speak for the whole House when I say that everyone, no matter where they live, should have the right to be who they are and to love whoever they love without judgment or fear. I hope this debate today will have made sure that the voice of this Parliament can be heard widely and that we can keep pressure on those whose ways need to be amended for the better.

4.58 pm

Nick Herbert: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response and for saying that the Government’s intention is to re-energise the Equal Rights Coalition. This is a really important moment for the UK Government to show continuing leadership in this area.

I thank all my right hon. and hon. Friends and Opposition Members for their contributions. I think we show the House of Commons at its best when we are able to debate these issues on an entirely bipartisan, cross-party basis, and demonstrate that our concern to promote equality is universal in this House of Commons and that we are not divided on the issue. In many speeches, we have recognised that there is still work to do.

A couple of issues raised related to the influence of religion on LGBT+ people. Next week, the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights will announce and call for evidence on a major new inquiry on the relationship between religion and LGBT rights. I think that we have to start to look at that relationship as an important driver of some of the concerns expressed today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I deeply regret that the commentators who criticise what goes on in this House and constantly find fault with the way in which Members of Parliament conduct themselves and their debates are not here to pay attention to this excellent debate, which has been thoughtful, gentle and constructive on all sides of the House. I only wish that people would sometimes pay attention to what is best about the way in which we conduct matters here in the House of Commons.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Flooding: Oxford West and Abingdon

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

5.1 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the House for allowing me to raise an extraordinarily important issue to my constituents: flooding in Oxford West and Abingdon. I am deeply grateful to the Minister for agreeing to meet me, following recent correspondence. We had been in touch via our offices, and then the opportunity for this debate arose. As she is aware, such opportunities are rare, so I thought this would be a great opportunity to talk in public. I am very grateful for her offer to meet more privately.

In 2007, several hundred households in Abingdon, and several local businesses, were flooded by the River Ock. Thousands of local residents were affected. I need not tell the Minister, who will have heard from other Members from across the country, just how traumatic the experience of being flooded is. We hear stories of people asking, similarly to how they would in the case of a fire, “What is the last thing I need to bring with me? What is important? How do I make sure we are safe? What will I come back to?” Some families were cast out of their homes for nearly a year, which caused enormous stress not just to them, but to their children and the wider community. At the time, there were vows by the community and in local petitions to do everything possible to help and to give the community the certainty it needed.

It is sometimes forgotten that there is always an economic cost to flooding. When the area floods, I have sat for hours on roads in Oxford, waiting to get through traffic and thinking about what else I could be doing at that time. The cost to the country is in the billions.

To turn to the Abingdon case, the Environment Agency, working with Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames regional flood and coastal committee, announced plans for an Abingdon flood alleviation scheme. After much patience and campaigning, residents were so relieved. Abingdon is in desperate need of such a scheme—this was not the first time it had flooded—especially for the River Ock, which was the main source of the disastrous flooding in 2007 that, as I described, residents will never forget. Imagine their disappointment when it was revealed that the scheme was to be abandoned.

The Environment Agency initially estimated that the scheme would cost £5 million, but when it realised more recently that the true cost was closer to double that, it decided that the value for money case had not been made, and the scheme was scrapped. Twelve years on from the 2007 flood, residents have not forgotten it. Their shock and frustration were palpable, especially given that the announcement to scrap the scheme was made in a seemingly innocuous Environment Agency newsletter in January. There was no public announcement, and, while I had received that same newsletter by email, it did not forcefully highlight or reflect the way in which this would have affected the community.

Of course I did what any Back-Bench MP would do: I called a public meeting. Let me say at this point how grateful I am to the Environment Agency and to the representatives of the local councils who came to explain
why this had happened. Questions were whirling. How could the costs have been so badly underestimated? Why would the Government not help, knowing what had happened in Abingdon, which I understand to have been a more than “once in 100 years” occurrence? People came to the meeting in droves—in fact, it was standing room only—and they were cynical, because they had been promised a scheme 12 years earlier.

One of the things that I found most striking about that meeting, apart from the cynicism—we talk about a loss of trust in Parliament, but it is not just about Brexit; decisions like this contribute to that loss of trust as well—was the fact that the community were desperate to do anything to secure what they wanted, and also felt that there was an inequity. The Abingdon scheme had been scrapped, but as the Minister will know very well, a massive scheme—the Oxford flood alleviation scheme—is under way. I represent both areas, so I am not implying any sort of competition. However, one of the residents did ask why £150 million—up from the initial estimate of £100 million—was available for the Oxford flood alleviation scheme but there was nothing for a much smaller scheme in Abingdon, saying “Why are they so much better than us?” That broke my heart, because I do not see my communities in that way.

The Environment Agency’s representatives said that they had secured funding contributions from others, including the local enterprise partnership, for the Oxford scheme. Why is it so difficult for a much smaller scheme to gain that type of funding? Is there something in the funding mechanisms that would enable communities to benefit from the schemes that they need? As I said earlier, the Minister and I have corresponded about this, and she said that the remainder of the funding for the Abingdon scheme should be raised locally by scheme partners and others. However, the EA representatives said at the meeting that they had a part to play. May I ask the Minister—this is a genuine question—what part the EA and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs play in trying to secure local funding?

Furthermore—I think that this is important with regard to communication with the local communities—if, as we now find, the decision to scrap the scheme was made in November 2018, why did it take until January for any kind of announcement to be made? I have spoken to a number of local councillors who were equally blindsided by the decision. When it comes to flooding, as with almost anything else, communities do not always want the moon on a stick; they just want to be involved. They want to be part of a decision and to understand why it was made. A public meeting after the fact should not have been necessary for people to obtain the information that they needed.

I ask the Minister this: how can we better engage communities in such decisions? There was no consultation; it looked as if the decision was being made behind closed doors. What is fascinating to me—and lovely—is the fact that, at the meeting, one of the residents raised the option of crowdfunding £6 million for a flood alleviation scheme for the community. That just goes to show the extraordinary good will that exists in areas like Abingdon to try to solve such extremely traumatic issues. However, I think it unlikely that a community—especially one that, while very old, is small—would be able to raise £6 million. So what more can the Government do? What representations is DEFRA making during this period of, hopefully, upcoming spending reviews for schemes that might seem small but, boy, to the communities affected they are not?

I have met Environment Agency representatives many times and, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would be proud because these projects are led by a group of extraordinary women. They are engineers and project managers. They tell me it is a lack of central Government funding that is stopping them delivering these schemes; it is not lack of nous or anything else. Indeed, the natural flood management project manager has been doing great work to find local, natural processes to reduce flood risk, but the money for that will apparently run out in a year’s time. Such smaller schemes mitigate flood risk at a local level.

I am sure the Minister will point out that some schemes have happened in Abingdon. The point I want to make is that this has not assuaged the fears of the whole community. Had she seen what happened there in 2007, she would know that it was akin to what happened in other parts of the country—it was absolutely devastating.

If we cannot afford that process, let alone the full alleviation scheme, I am concerned that the disasters of previous years are destined to repeat themselves. That is to do with the geography of the Thames valley, which is the largest unprotected floodplain in the whole United Kingdom—I was shocked to discover that. Everywhere else has something, but the Thames valley, which includes all of us here, does not. This discussion is therefore urgent. It is not simply a case of, “I want to do what’s best for my community,” although of course I do as an MP, because there is a bigger issue: what will we do in the face of climate change for the Thames valley, which is itself completely unprotected?

Added to that, the number of homes in Oxfordshire that the Government want to build has doubled, and there are scheduled to be 1 million new homes across the Thames valley between now and 2050 according to the National Infrastructure Commission. The Environment Agency has been clear: that cannot be done without finally finding some sort of solution to protect the Thames valley.

What conversations is DEFRA having with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on its big plans for infrastructure and for roads? We have the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway. All this is happening in an unprotected area. In private conversations, the Environment Agency has said categorically that there is no way that it can allow—it is a statutory consultee for all planning applications—all those homes to be built without the situation being sorted out. I am sure that that will come as no surprise to the Minister.

I now want to move on to the Oxford flood alleviation scheme, which, as I said, will cost £150 million. While the scheme is clearly in a better state than the Abingdon, one, it faces delays. A small number of smallholders are challenging the process, as is absolutely their right. I want a little clarification from the Minister about how that will affect the timeline and what the process will be from now on.

While Abingdon faced its own floods because of the Ock, we also have the Cherwell, the Thames and other issues in Oxford itself, which is of course a much larger conurbation. I have already spoken about the economic
costs of this scheme not being concluded. My understanding now is that it will not be finished until at least 2024, which is a significant delay.

There are also specific local issues. I understand that the construction at Redbridge would result in enormous amounts of traffic. I also want to mention South Hinksey, which I often do not talk about. It is a small village just off the A34, which is going to be the main route for construction traffic for the Oxford flood alleviation scheme. This was all proceeding without the parish council’s knowledge, so how will we ensure that tiny communities that are badly affected by such issues are taken into account?

I want to talk briefly about climate change. The head of the Environment Agency, Emma Howard Boyd, gave a stark warning on flooding when the agency published its 50-year flood risk plan earlier this month. The UK needs to tackle our climate emergency head on; otherwise, our communities will face devastating consequences. I find myself puzzled, however. Surely more needs to be done to mitigate the environmental impact of the construction phase of these works. Constituents have raised their concern that the works on the Oxford flood alleviation scheme themselves are not green. This is not just about pollution; it is also about new planting, particularly of ash trees. Can the Minister assure us that the carbon footprint of the mitigation is also being factored into the equation?

The story of flood mitigation in Oxford West and Abingdon continues. We are all aware that we will never be able to fully protect against flooding, but there is much that we can do to mitigate risk. I firmly believe that part of the answer lies in actively involving residents and helping cash-strapped, resource-stretched local councils to find the funding and solutions that they need. These flood alleviation schemes will be vital, and they are long overdue, but they need help. Today, I call on the Government to please provide the funding necessary to get the Abingdon flood alleviation scheme off the ground and to ensure that the Oxford flood alleviation scheme is arrived at as swiftly and responsibly as possible. In the longer term, we need action to protect the whole Thames valley and to tackle climate change nationally and internationally. I appreciate that those will be no small feats, but I hope that they lie at the heart of the Minister’s Department and in her heart, too. I very much look forward to hearing what she has to say.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this important debate, in which she has put forward the case for her constituents with great passion. Flood and coastal risk management is a high priority for the Government, and as the MP for Suffolk Coastal, I know very well the impacts that flooding can have on lives and livelihoods.

I am aware of the challenges faced by the town of Abingdon and the recent flooding that it has experienced, notably in 2007 when more than 400 homes were flooded by the River Ock, and when water levels exceeded those of the 1947 flood, which was previously the most significant such event in Abingdon.

The Environment Agency has been working in partnership with Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames regional flood and coastal committee to try to find ways to reduce flooding in Abingdon. The hon. Lady rightly said that a flood wall was built in 2017 to better protect some properties at St Helen’s Mill from the River Ock. A further 106 properties can also benefit from the deployment of temporary barriers, and that plan is ready to be deployed, as and when.

The Environment Agency had identified a potential flood risk management scheme in Abingdon, but, as the hon. Lady pointed out, the cost estimate suddenly doubled. It is my understanding that the initial costings came from a desk-based study and that further detailed design and modelling were needed to develop the case further. The original cost of about £5.2 million was the starting point, but the agency then undertook additional modelling and ground investigations, which allowed it to produce the more detailed outline designs for the flood storage area. The cost increasing to £10 million is due not to one specific issue, but rather to a number of activities. For example, the reservoir needs to be compliant with the Reservoirs Act 1975 due to its size, resulting in the need for additional safety measures, such as staff access routes for operational staff and maintenance vehicles. After appraisal, the cost has been estimated at about £10 million, as I have said.

Significant effort has been put into appraising this option and understanding the complexities of managing flood risk in the area. The Environment Agency considered whether it would be possible to create a larger flood storage area, but this would have had detrimental impacts on properties upstream. It also reviewed other areas for flood storage opportunities. However, the proposed site is deemed to be the only technically feasible location. This is where we come to the crux of the problem. Unfortunately, it was found that this proposal had a negative cost-benefit ratio and so was not eligible for any support at all from the £2.6 billion of central Government funding that has been made available over six years. The decision was also due in part to the presence of culverted watercourses in the town, which restrict the standard of protection that can be achieved. I regret that, as a result, the option will not be progressed with Government funding, although I am sure the Environment Agency would share its work and its design if a locally funded scheme wanted to proceed.

The Environment Agency also considered a number of local options for the Swift Ditch and River Stert, both of which also contribute to flood risk in Abingdon. At an early stage, however, it established that none of the options would deliver sufficient benefit or reduction in flood risk to deliver value for money. Again, the decision was taken not to progress further.

The hon. Lady spoke about communications. Residents and stakeholders were informed at the end of December through the newsletter she mentioned (which is the steering group decision. I understand that groups were invited to attend a meeting with the Environment Agency to discuss the matter—for example, the project team met with the Ock Valley Flood Group.

The Environment Agency’s current routine of river maintenance, combined with the impact of existing structures upstream from Abingdon, provides a one in 25 standard of protection in any given year. Despite the
project not progressing at this time, the land area for
flood storage is protected in the current Vale of White
Horse local plan up to 2031. The project might be
considered in the light of future changes, but I do not
want to get the hon. Lady’s hopes up. Significant changes
in terms of reductions in costs or reassessment of
benefits would be required to shift the benefit-cost ratio
from negative to positive.

From the late 1990s, central Government took on
being the main source of funding for flood defences.
The Government would fund an entire project or not at
all. The funding formula takes a number of factors into
account, but the main focus is protecting homes. We
changed that in the years of the coalition Government
by creating the partnership funding policy. That was
introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for
Newbury (Richard Benyon), with a little help from me.
We invited my right hon. Friend to Suffolk and took
him on a journey—basically, we trapped him in a van,
and on the way down we explained all the challenges we
faced in making use of opportunities to take the work
forward, and that led to the establishment of the partnership
funding policy. It changed the dynamic so that projects
with a positive benefit-cost ratio could benefit from
Government funding, but set out clearly to local councils
and communities what levels of partnership funding
they would need to find for the project to progress.

Partnership funding can be secured from a range of
sources, including local beneficiaries, partners and growth
funds. Early indications suggest that up to 25% more
schemes will go ahead in the coming years than if
project costs were fully met by the Government. To give
another example, in a Budget a few years ago we
announced that companies could get tax relief if they
invested in flood defences through approved projects.

The Government set aside £2.6 billion of investment
between 2015 and 2021, to better protect the country
from flooding. That in itself was significant, because for
the first time there was a long-term budget. Instead of a
hand-to-mouth existence, with the budget being announced
yearly, better planning was possible, as was more sustainable
development of projects. That record investment has
attracted more than £700 million of additional partnership
investment, funding over 1,000 flood defence schemes,
which will better protect 300,000 homes by 2021 and is
projected to save the economy more than £30 billion in
avoided damages. Between 2015 and 2020 we will also
spend over £1 billion on the maintenance of flood
defence assets.

There is a lot of demand on the floods budget and it
is not possible to deliver every proposal that would
reduce flood risk. It is my duty as the responsible
Minister to take a national perspective on flood risk
management, guided by the funding formula. We have
been able to release some further funding, particularly
for projects in deprived communities, to unlock those
projects, and £40 million was allocated to various
communities last year.

The future spending review is a matter for negotiation
with the Treasury, as will be consideration of a new
funding formula that may take into account slightly
different factors. At the moment, it is focused on homes,
but we are considering extending the consideration of
the number of properties and other elements, such as
sparsity. Oxford is, of course, well known for its floodplains.
Christ Church meadow is probably one of the most
famous, but there are many others around the city in
particular. Elsewhere on the River Thames some
communities and councils are considering raising a levy
to bring in protection, but by and large since 2009 the
planning guidance to local government has been clear
that there should not be building on floodplains. There
is the potential for people to do it, but only by designing
properties differently—for example, some schemes have
the garage on the ground and then the main residence
on stilts. We will see what happens with the future
spending review, but I will be pressing that case.

The Oxford flood alleviation scheme, which the hon.
Lady mentioned, will cost about £150 million and will
be one of the biggest flood schemes in the country. It is
expected to reduce significantly the flood risk to homes,
businesses, services and major transport routes, and
while mainly funded by flood defence grant in aid, the
project has secured £66.5 million in partnership funding,
including from the local enterprise partnership and the
county council. The scheme is designed to reduce the
risk from floods of a size not seen in Oxford since 1947.
Eight months ago, Vale of White Horse District Council
commissioned an additional review of the downstream
impact modelling, and it confirmed that the scheme
would not increase flood risk to properties further
downstream.

The hon. Lady mentioned that the Oxford scheme in
its current form will present a severe level of disruption
to residents during its four-year construction period. I
am surprised that she does not seem to accept that such
a large project, which will bring many benefits to the
city, will bring some disruption. The EA is in discussion
with Highways England and the highways authority
about the traffic impact on the A34. I understand it is
also working closely with South Hinksey Parish Council
and the community to listen to and address the concerns
raised in their planning application objection. It has
arranged a community meeting with the parish council
in the summer and has already reassured the community
that the temporary footpaths will be of the same standard
as those currently in place—in other words, suitable for
all users, including cyclists and wheelchair users.

On the suggested environmental impacts, I believe
that the project is showing our commitment to improving
the natural environment with development. Our tree-
planting proposals will result in more woodland within
the scheme area. In the long term, this means the area
will benefit from an environmental gain of more than
2,000 additional trees. We have designed the scheme to
be as natural as possible in appearance and to blend
into the surrounding fields. It will work with the natural
floodplain and fit in with the existing environment. It
will create more than 20 hectares of new woodland habitat,
and the second stage part of the channel will be seeded
and grazed by cattle to create floodplain grazing marsh.
We recognise the importance of Hinksey meadow, a
valuable natural habitat that includes many rare species,
and we intend to minimise the impact on the existing
meadow and create a new meadow of about 18 hectares.
Creating larger areas of floodplain meadow will enhance
the long-term resilience of those plant communities.

On the compulsory purchase order, the normal procedure
is being followed. Following objections, in line with the
planning process, a public inquiry will be held. I cannot
give the hon. Lady the dates she seeks, because we need
to take it through the normal process, but I do not
anticipate that the CPO inquiry will unduly delay the scheme. The EA has been working closely with landowners in the scheme area for several years. We are waiting to confirm a date for the inquiry, but I will write to the hon. Lady once we know it. The EA will continue to negotiate with affected landowners, leaseholders, tenants and occupiers as necessary. However, if some objections from affected parties remain unresolved, the public inquiry will go ahead, and an independently appointed inspector will consider the available evidence.

The hon. Lady referred to climate change, and resilience is one of the key features that we are trying to build into the thinking in the EA’s strategy. It matters that we anticipate the future, but we should not worry communities unduly. For example, some people have expressed concerns that communities will just be moved away from the coast. We need to work carefully, and I am sure that hon. Lady will welcome the consultation, which is under way, and the call for the evidence that the Government will issue before the summer recess, which will help to inform the national policy statement that will be published before the end of the year.

In closing, I recognise that this is not the answer the hon. Lady was hoping for and understand that she will want to keep campaigning. If she would still like a meeting, I would be happy to arrange one. Abingdon is a lovely town—it is larger than my Suffolk constituency’s biggest town—and I know that she will continue to put residents’ interests first, but we must be realistic with the communities we represent, recognising that protecting people’s homes is an ongoing challenge, even with the £2.6 billion that we are spending on the programme over this six-year period.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

UK-Saudi Arabia Joint Military Exercises

1. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What joint military exercises UK armed forces personnel have conducted with Saudi Arabian armed forces in the last three years.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): I would like to pay tribute to Guardsman Mathew Talbot of the Coldstream Guards, who was killed on duty on 5 May in Malawi while taking part in a counter-poaching patrol. Our thoughts remain with his family and friends at this difficult time. I also wish to pay tribute to Guardsman Mathew Talbot and his family.

In the past three years, UK armed forces have conducted four exercises with Saudi Arabia: in 2017 and again this year, Exercise Desert Soldier; and in 2018 a Gulf Co-operation Council exercise, Gulf Shield, and an exercise, Saudi-British Green Flag.

Marion Fellows: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s remarks and welcome her to her place? Saudi officers are being trained in the UK. Any UK steps to stop Saudi committing further human rights abuses must be seen in that context. Thousands have already been killed by Saudi forces—the UK influence did not stop them. Does she agree with me and with her colleague, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who is the Minister for Europe and the Americas, that Saudi actions are “deplorable”? Will she review our training and co-operation with Saudi armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: I would say that all we do with the Saudi military is in compliance with and promoting compliance with international humanitarian law. I would ask the hon. Lady: does she think the world would be a better place if we did not do that?

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): May I be the first from the Conservative Benches to congratulate my right hon. Friend on his well-merited promotion and to wish him well for the future? Does she agree that it is in the UK’s interests to continue intelligence and security co-operation with Saudi Arabia, as with any other Gulf allies that feel threatened by Iran or Iranian proxies?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words. I was Minister for the Armed Forces while he was Secretary of State and I learned a great deal from him. He is absolutely right to say that we have joint interests, and it is quite right that the UK continues our defence partnership with Saudi Arabia.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her place—the first woman to hold the post. May I also associate my party with the comments she made about Mr Talbot and his family?

Saudi Arabia is one of the most human rights-abusing countries on the face of the earth, particularly for women and for other minorities. Of course, the right hon. Lady remains the Minister for Women and Equalities. Is it not time to start unpicking this close relationship, not least in the light of today’s revelations on the front page of The Times, which tell us that her Department is freelancing when it comes to torture policy?

Penny Mordaunt: An urgent question has been granted on the last point and I hope to provide the House with some reassurances at that time. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I feel very keenly that women around the world who need our support—human rights advocates and human rights defenders who are out there trying to get reform in their nations—need the UK to lean in to those nations, not retreat from our relationship with those nations.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The problem is that we are leaning in with the arms trade to those nations. All the stuff the Secretary of State has just outlined about continuing the nature of the relationship has not led to any change on women’s rights or gay rights, or for those who are members of different faiths, so is it not time that she stood at that Dispatch Box, nailed her colours to the mast, restated our values, unpicked that relationship and said that we will have no part with a regime that chops the heads and hands off people for simple crimes?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman with my track record in my previous post, when I went to Djibouti, got the shipping records of the traffic that was being held at Hodeidah port and then presented those findings to the commander of Saudi forces. Only by engaging and having dialogue with those individuals and those nations will we get better things to happen.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When I was in the Saudi air operations centre recently, I spoke to Saudi pilots, who were a very impressive lot. I asked them about their rules of engagement. I looked at those rules and they looked remarkably similar to rules of engagement the Royal Air Force would use. Does my right hon. Friend agree that they are pretty strict?

Penny Mordaunt: That concurs with what I have seen and, indeed, with reports that are in the public domain. We know that our training has assisted individuals in making judgments, while operations are going on, that have prevented civilian casualties. There is more to do with other nations as well, but it is absolutely right that the Royal Air Force and others in our armed forces are trying to get good practice to happen in targeting and other areas.
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**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and echo her comments about Guardsman Mathew Talbot—all our thoughts are with his family at this sad time.

One reason why Labour opposes any future joint exercises with Saudi Arabia is what Amnesty International calls the “widespread” and “common” use of torture in the kingdom. As we have heard, today’s *Times* newspaper reveals that the MOD is willing to share intelligence with states like Saudi Arabia, where there is a real risk of torture, provided that “the potential benefits justify accepting the risk and the legal consequences”.

Will the Secretary of State clarify the Government’s position urgently and state categorically that the MOD is opposed to torture in all circumstances?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. I will go into more detail on the matter when I respond to the urgent question later, but that is the Government’s policy. The hon. Gentleman is wrong about our training with Saudi Arabia, just as the leader of the Labour party has been wrong on the Falklands, on Sierra Leone, on Syria, on Kosovo, on Russia and on Crimea, and wrong about Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda and the IRA. That is why decisions about national security should remain with a Conservative Government.

**Income Tax Rate: Scotland**

2. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): How many payments the Government have made to armed forces personnel based in Scotland to mitigate the Scottish rate of income tax. [910968]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood)**: Thanks to the surprising decision by the Scottish Government, our valiant armed forces are obliged to pay a higher rate of income tax than people in other parts of the country. As I hope the whole House would agree, the MOD sees armed forces personnel as a national asset, so we have introduced mitigation payments for eligible personnel to offset the unfair burden placed on our valiant soldiers, sailors and air personnel.

**Mr Speaker**: That is all very well, but I thought that the Minister was seeking to group this question with Question 14.

**Mr Ellwood**: So enthusiastic was I to answer the question, I failed to ask your permission to group this question with Question 14, Sir.

**Mr Speaker**: The Minister was very enthusiastic to make his point, at any rate.

**John Lamont**: I am grateful to the Minister for his response and, indeed, for the Government’s policy of ensuring that our brave armed forces men and women are not left out of pocket by the SNP Scottish Government’s bad decision to put up Scottish taxes—it has become known as the “nat tax” in Scotland—but I believe the damage has already been done. I have received anecdotal evidence from the spouses of armed forces men and women who are now not coming to Scotland because they fear paying higher taxes in Scotland if their spouses are serving there.

**Mr Ellwood**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this issue affects not just those in uniform for whom we have responsibility, costing the MOD £4 million a year, but their spouses, partners and so forth. We are pleased to say that around three quarters of those partners, spouses and so forth are in employment—that is on a par with the civilian sector—but that means that they, too, face that tax burden if they move to Scotland.

14. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Given the impact on spouses, is there a case for the payment of a local overseas allowance? Or would that be to hand the nationalists a propaganda advantage?

**Mr Ellwood**: My right hon. Friend answers his own question.

**Mr Speaker**: Very droll; well done.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As a member of the Defence Committee, I welcome the Secretary of State to their new post.

It has now been a year and no payment has been made, so as the Minister is not paying so-called mitigation to armed forces personnel, will he say how long it took to pay the £17,000 golden bye-bye to the former Secretary of State?

**Mr Ellwood**: I will not get drawn into the second part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I will clarify the first part. [Interruption.] If he can hold on to his seat for a second, I will answer the first part. It is a retrospective payment, and because the taxes have gone up even more, we have now increased the amount from £1,500 to £2,200. Taxes in Scotland are going up.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): But of course about a third of armed forces personnel based in England, notably the lowest paid members of the armed forces, are paying more income tax than their counterparts in Scotland. Will the Minister give some information to the House on what plans there are to mitigate the lowest paid armed forces personnel in England?

**Mr Ellwood**: There is a question later on armed forces pay, and I will touch on that matter then. Let me make it clear: we see our armed forces as a national asset. If they are to be based in Scotland, they should not have to feel that they need to question whether they should go there because of the increased taxes that they will face.

**Armed Forces Personnel**

3. **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [910969]

15. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [910981]
The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We remain committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces and we have a range of measures under way to improve recruitment and retention. Those measures are kept under constant review. Importantly, the services continue to meet all their current commitments, keeping the country and its interests safe.

Preet Kaur Gill: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her post. Last year, a National Audit Office report stated that it would be another 20 years before the RAF has enough pilots. Recent reports have shown that this problem has still not been fixed. With many trainee pilots stuck awaiting advanced training, how will the Minister commit to resolving this desperate situation?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. There is currently a review under the Military Flying Training System. We have, in part, been victims of our own success in this area, but the Minister for defence procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), has already answered questions on this. We are absolutely committed to streamlining this process to ensure that pilots are not waiting too long for that training. I can reassure the House that, while they are waiting, they are being suitably employed by the Royal Air Force; none the less, we are committed to speeding up that training.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Welsh Guards 1st Battalion are 30% below their target strength. Overall, the Army has shrunk. How does that fit with the Conservative manifesto commitment to “maintain the overall size of the armed forces”?

Mark Lancaster: I have good news for the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, I hope for the House. In January, the total size of the Army, including trained and untrained strength, was 81,750. At the end of April, the total size of the Regular Army, both trained and untrained, had risen to 82,770. That is a rise of more than 1,000 personnel.

17. [910983] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. The Army is below its target strength in part because of the difficulties with and the inefficiency in Capita’s administration. What steps is the Department taking to make the joining process for new recruits easier?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. He will have seen the Secretary of State’s comments on this over recent days. I am pleased to say that a written ministerial statement on this subject will be tabled tomorrow.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): For the avoidance of doubt, I do normally sit on this side of the House.

I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her place. There are people holding down good jobs and contributing to society who are on the spectrum and might have Asperger’s. They are, as I say, contributing to society yet if they try to join the armed forces they are stopped at square one. Will the Government reconsider that policy because these people might make a very considerable contribution to the defence of the UK?

Mark Lancaster: This is one of the areas—not specifically related to that condition but I am happy to look at it—on which we have had a series of medical symposiums. We feel that perhaps some of the medical requirements for joining the armed forces are out of date. One example that I have used before is childhood asthma. If it were to reoccur, it is unlikely to do so until the late 40s or 50s, at which point most people will have already left the armed forces. But I take the hon. Gentleman’s comments on board and will ensure that that is part of the study.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): In Moray, we have seen a positive increase in the number of military personnel, which is down to the significant investment by the UK Government in the Poseidon P-8 aircraft at RAF Lossiemouth. Will the Minister take this opportunity to welcome those coming to my constituency in the next few years because of the arrival of the P-8 aircraft?

Mark Lancaster: Indeed: the purchase of the nine P-8s was a very welcome step that this Government have made. It will significantly enhance our capability, and the investment that we have seen in Scotland ahead of those aircraft is significant and welcome.

4. Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of commissioning icebreaker capability to operate exclusively in the Arctic.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Royal Navy’s ice patrol ship, HMS Protector, has an icebreaking capability and can operate in the Arctic. We are aware of the importance of the high north region to our environment, security, prosperity and energy supply, and keep our requirements—including further icebreaking capability—under review.

Mrs Moon: Far too few women are engaged in defence, so may I welcome the Secretary of State to her position, as a fellow woman who has served with her on the Select Committee on Defence? The Arctic ice is melting, but during the winter its capability to freeze is still present. Both Russia and China are building large numbers of icebreakers. Will the Minister look at forward planning so that Britain can also have icebreaker capability in the north to protect British shipping when those sea routes begin to open up, as they will?
Mark Lancaster: As I mentioned, HMS Protector does have an icebreaking capability. However, I take the hon. Lady’s points on board. As she will be aware, we will shortly be publishing the Arctic strategy, which builds on the House of Commons Defence Committee’s “On Thin Ice” investigation last year. The hon. Lady is quite right; we are looking very carefully at the Arctic—not least at potential trade routes—and her point is a reasonable one.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The report “On Thin Ice”, to which the Minister referred, plainly laid out the threat from Russia, which has significantly increased in the Arctic in recent years. Therefore, the call for either ice-strengthened or ice class ships—together with, for example, ice-strengthened submarines and increased training, such as the first-class training offered to our Royal Marines in the high north—is extremely important. In that context, when will the Ministry of Defence be publishing its long-awaited report, and will it take quite a robust attitude towards encouraging NATO to taking the Arctic very seriously indeed?

Mark Lancaster: The report will be published shortly. I apologise to the House for the delay and ask that hon. Members do not read anything into it. Of course, my hon. Friend is quite right and has shown a keen interest in this part of the world for many years. This point precisely ties into the earlier question about the purchase of the P-8 aircraft. Only last year, I attended the Ice Exercise—ICEx—up in the high north, where I had the honour to go on board HMS Trenchant and spend two days under the ice. We are showing an increasing interest in this part of the world for the reasons expressed by the House.

Capita Army Recruitment

5. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of Capita’s Army recruitment contract with her Department.

Mark Lancaster: The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Army continues to work closely with Capita with multiple interventions in place, and is delivering improvements. The year 2018-19 was the best for applications in five years. As expected, we are now starting to see those applications move through the pipeline. The last quarter of 2018-19 was the best performing quarter for enlistments since 2012-13. Although we cannot be complacent and continue to maintain close oversight of this contract’s performance, this does demonstrate early signs for cautious—I repeat, cautious—positivity.

Mary Glindon: I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place. There is no denying that the Capita contract is an appalling failure, when the Army is still 8% below its par. This issue has been repeatedly raised during Defence questions, but the situation keeps worsening. Does that not show that the Minister’s Department has zero desire to resolve the problem?

Mark Lancaster: I think I tried to address this point earlier. Obviously, we have seen a rise in applications, and we have now seen a rise—taking the Regular Army as an example—in people entering training, with an extra 1,000 in the first quarter of this year. It can take up to two years for a fully trained member of the armed forces to count as being trained and therefore to qualify as part of the figure we always use at the end. But the early signs are positive. Not only are applications up; we now have more people joining, wearing a uniform and being trained, and those people will slowly filter their way through the process.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I have been waiting two months now for an answer to a fairly straightforward parliamentary question about the number of applicants being rejected on medical grounds. Given the deeply unsatisfactory way that Capita seems to handle applications where a medical issue has been flagged, especially in the area of mental illness, will the Minister please look further into this to ensure that there is fairness in the system and the Army does not lose talent?

Mark Lancaster: My right hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the fact that the one thing we do not want to do is to lose talent. I made reference earlier to the medical review process that we are looking at. We have already found areas where we think we can improve, and I look forward to those improvements being implemented shortly.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her post?

It is scarcely credible that after all Capita’s incompetence on the recruitment contract, its failure on the defence estate’s management contract and the assessment by experts that this company carried the highest possible risk factor, the Minister is still pushing ahead with plans to outsource the Defence Fire and Rescue Service to Capita. To make matters worse, his Department is now spending hard-earned taxpayers’ money on an expensive legal battle with rival company Serco. Is it not high time that the Government stopped throwing good money after bad in pursuit of an ideological fixation with privatisation, did the right thing and abandoned plans to outsource the Defence Fire and Rescue Service?

Mark Lancaster: I do not think there is any ideological belief about having to use Capita. For reasons I have already explained, we are seeing progress in the one particular contract that I am responsible for. With regard to the Defence Fire and Rescue Service, which also falls under the Army, there has been a court case that is currently under review, as the hon. Lady knows.

Iranian Military Action: Deterrence

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Whether the Government plan to (a) support and (b) deploy in conjunction with the US to deter Iranian military action against the UK’s allies in the Gulf.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The United Kingdom shares United States, European and Gulf partners’ concerns about Iran’s destabilising activities in the region. We continue to work closely with our allies and partners to mitigate the threats to regional security.
Mr Hollobone: If the balloon goes up, are we ready and will we help our allies?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, we are, and we are already deployed in the region. This is a region where we have huge stakes and a huge amount invested. We are working with our allies and partners, first, to try to de-escalate things in the region, but also to truly understand the facts behind recent events.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her new job? Some of us will miss her at the Department for International Development, where she really ploughed her own furrow and was very refreshing.

Are our defence forces capable of helping any of our allies, either in the middle east or if someone invaded one of our allies in Europe? We have minuscule armed forces. The 75-year D-day celebration is in June. We could not defend anyone with the size of the defence force we have at the moment.

Penny Mordaunt: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. I am sure he will continue his campaign on road traffic accidents and all that Britain can do to prevent them around the world.

I think that our armed forces are getting increasingly more capable, looking what we are doing in terms of operations. Increasingly, we are forward-deploying people. The Royal Navy is undertaking more activity. However, we must ensure that the budget, or what we are doing with the budget, is absolutely linked to the tasks that we require our armed forces to do because of the mission that we give them.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Last week, the British deputy commander of Operation Inherent Resolve stated that “there has been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria.”

He was then rebuked by US Central Command. The Foreign Secretary later went on to declare that the UK and the US share “the same assessment of the heightened threat posed by Iran”, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office changed its travel advice for Iran. Will the Secretary of State clarify the Government’s position, and will she confirm that the UK will oppose any escalation of tensions in the middle east?

Penny Mordaunt: We want the increasing tensions to de-escalate. I think that the major general’s remarks have been clarified; he was speaking in a particular context. We are absolutely on the same page as the United States in terms of the assessment of risk, and we have always been clear-eyed about the threats that Iran poses.

Defence Procurement

7. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage competition in defence procurement. [910973]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): Competition remains the cornerstone of defence procurement policy, except where other strategic considerations need to be taken into account—for example, national security, operational advantage and freedom of action.

Chris Ruane: I thank the Minister for his visit to defence companies in my constituency and for his helpful and inclusive approach when he visits. Does he agree that the ability of those companies in my constituency and of British companies in general will be greatly damaged by a hard Brexit?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind comments. It was a pleasure to meet a number of businesses in his constituency. We have been engaging a lot with the small and medium-sized enterprise supply chain. In fact, on 9 May, I held a roundtable with small businesses in north Wales, and they felt very optimistic about the future. Through our equipment plan, we are actively engaging with the supply chain to ensure that the opportunities in each of our projects will maximise the input that they can have.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. It is a pleasure to see such an amazing woman on the Front Bench, standing up for defence.

Last Thursday, myself and colleagues from across the House on the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair launched our report on the national shipbuilding strategy. We have real concerns that competition, particularly for naval shipbuilding, is based on a model that does not include the economic benefits to the UK being recycled back in when we spend UK taxpayers’ money. Can the Minister give me an assurance that the Ministry is looking at that and will work with the Treasury to change our model, so that we can get the best value and ensure that our shipbuilding pipeline lasts in the UK?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She will be aware that Sir John Parker is currently doing a review of his initial report. International competition is also about encouraging UK industry and UK shipyards to be as competitive as possible, so that they can not only maximise the opportunities that UK defence offers, but take advantage of competition around the globe, too.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister said that this is to make UK yards more efficient, but what they need is throughput of work. His Department has chosen to put the contract for the fleet solid support vessel into international competition. What weight was given in that decision to his Government’s prosperity agenda, our sovereign capability and the need to protect UK shipbuilding?

Stuart Andrew: That is precisely why the Type 26s, Type 31s and aircraft carriers were built in the UK, so that we could maintain that capability here in the United Kingdom. The right hon. Gentleman might be aware of the speech that the Secretary of State recently made, and part of what she is doing is a review into the MARS—military afloat reach and sustainability—tankers, to ensure that we look at the exact experiences with that and take lessons from it.
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises in defence procurement is essential in promoting innovation in the sector?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend is right. One of the things I have noticed in this role and as I go around the country is that innovation really exists in the SME sector. We have to ensure that more SMEs feel they can do business with the Ministry of Defence, so that we can take advantage of that for our armed forces.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Government’s procurement process for military equipment is a shambles, and nowhere is that better seen than in the way it is handling the procurement of the Type 31e frigates. Having started, then stopped, then restarted the procurement process for the Type 31s last year and imposed a totally unrealistic price ceiling of £250 million per frigate, will the Minister confirm that he has now effectively removed that financial ceiling?

Stuart Andrew: I do not actually recognise the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation of the competition. This is a challenging competition for the very reason that we want to ensure that UK industry is competitive—not just in the UK, but around the globe. We have taken a pragmatic approach to change the parameters to ensure consistency with all other competitions that have been happening. This is a challenge to industry, but we want it to be competitive. That was the whole point of the national shipbuilding strategy.

Commonwealth Servicemen and Women

8. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What progress the Government have made on abolishing application fees for the right for indefinite leave to remain for Commonwealth servicemen and women.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As we discussed in an excellent Westminster Hall debate in the week before last, Commonwealth servicemen and women make an important contribution to our armed forces capability. The visa application process is Home Office-led, but I do agree that there is a moral case for abolishing the visa application fees, and we continue to have discussions with the Home Office to make this case.

Richard Graham: In her first departmental questions, may I warmly congratulate our first ever female Defence Secretary?

I thank the Minister for his continued support on this cross-party cause, about which my letter has been signed by almost 150 MPs from five parties in this House. While I recognise what he has said about the possibility of precedents being set by changes to the immigration legislation, does my right hon. Friend agree that it should be perfectly possible to make an amendment to the armed forces provision in the Immigration Act 1971 so that our Commonwealth servicemen and women can apply free of charge?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and we are certainly looking at that Act. The starting salary that someone receives when they come in to join the armed forces does meet the threshold that the Home Office requires. The trouble is when they wish to bring in a spouse or partner, or indeed their children, as that is when they run into the additional minimum income thresholds. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the fact that the over 4,500 Commonwealth members of our armed forces and the over 3,000 Gurkhas make such a valid and important contribution to our capability.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I agree with everything that has just been said by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). Could the Minister talk to his opposite number at the Home Office? I have had cases of constituents who have travelled halfway across the world, signed up for the armed forces and then, when they leave the armed forces, are not entitled to benefits because their immigration status has not been sorted out. That seems to me to be a fairly miserable way to treat people.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which also came up in the debate. It is important when such people embark on this journey—when they sign the papers and endeavour to come to the UK—that they are fully aware of the current situation. The families federations, with which we work very closely, have made the case that it is not even clear to those actually embarking on the journey that, although it is okay for them to come across, they will bump into a financial burden should they wish to bring in their family, and we need to move forward on that.

9. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on surrounding communities of the closure of RAF Scampton; and what plans she has for the future siting of the RAF aerobatic team.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The RAF remains absolutely committed to Lincolnshire as part of our defence rationalisation programme. My hon. Friend is aware that we have had to restructure some of the assets in that county, but we do expect to see considerable investment in the near future.

Sir Edward Leigh: I apologise to the Minister for banging on about RAF Scampton and its closure, but I will not be satisfied until it is engraved on his heart. Can he relieve the acute distress in Lincolnshire caused by the closure of RAF Scampton by announcing, very shortly, that he will keep the Red Arrows in Lincolnshire at one of the three remaining superb RAF bases—Coningsby, Waddington or Cranwell—and can he help the local community by continuing the heritage centre associated with the Dambusters raid?

Mr Ellwood: I will take those points in reverse order, if I may. First, may I pay tribute to that incredible endeavour that took place in May 1943, with Barnes Wallis and Guy Gibson? Every child grows up knowing what the RAF is all about because of what those brave heroes did back in the middle of the war.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that this is also the home of the RAF Red Arrows. That gives me licence to say, if I may, that we look forward to seeing
them participate in the air component of the land, sea and air effort to pay tribute on the 75th anniversary of D-day, starting from the Defence Secretary’s constituency.

My hon. Friend is also aware that we have had to rationalise, and Scampton will close, but let us not forget that Lincolnshire very much remains at the heart of the RAF. We have RAF Digby; Cranwell, where the training takes place; Coningsby, of course, where our fast jet component is; and RAF Waddington, which is home to our intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capability.

Mr Speaker: Well, we are certainly better informed, but it looks as though we can look forward to a good deal more banging on from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on this important matter.

Veterans Strategy

10. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What progress the Government have made on implementing the veterans strategy. [910976]

11. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on implementing the veterans strategy. [910977]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Government already do much to support our brave veterans and their families, but for the first time we are mapping out a 10-year strategy to give greater clarity on how we want that support to develop.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer. What role does he see the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee playing in the development of better care for our veterans? Is there not a case for renewing and revitalising the committee—after all, it is nearly 100 years old—so that it can play a more prominent and effective role?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He almost suggested—I am sure that he did not mean to—that the original members of the committee were still serving, but it has advanced and reformed, and I work with it very closely. It is important that when someone leaves the armed forces, they are supported by our country, which is indebted to them for their service. It is important that we use that committee and others to provide veterans with the support they expect.

Luke Graham: Can my right hon. Friend tell the House the level of spending on veterans in all parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Ellwood: It is difficult to put an exact figure on it, but we estimate that the MOD spends around £7 billion on our veterans. It is so important that we provide that support wherever it is needed across the country, whether through pensions, mental health support or simply comradeship, to recognise their service and thank them for it.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Can the Minister give some indication of how he intends to monitor the delivery of the covenant, given the recent report by the charity SSAFA, which said that only 16% of veterans actually believed that it was being delivered effectively?

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman must not mean the veterans strategy, because we have not yet started it. We put it out to consultation and received over 4,000 replies, which we are now collating. I hope to make a statement to the House in the near future on how we intend to move forward with the 10-year strategy.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As my party’s defence spokesperson, may I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on her new position?

The Minister knows my frustration about the unequal and inconsistent approach to implementing the armed forces covenant across this United Kingdom. As part of the veterans strategy, will he look again at the ten-minute rule Bill that I introduced to try to ensure a duty of compliance across the United Kingdom?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman touches on two important aspects. First, there is the obligation to honour the covenant, which is still in its infancy. There is so much work still to be done, because implementation is very disparate across the country. Secondly, there are specific challenges in Northern Ireland. I have had the pleasure of visiting Northern Ireland with him to see how we can ensure that the covenant is honoured there, given the very sensitive issues faced there.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On behalf of the Defence Committee, may I welcome the Secretary of State to her new position, for which she is well qualified indeed? May I also pay tribute to her predecessor, who not only saved our amphibious forces from premature dissolution, but won considerable battles with one of our real adversaries in defence: the Treasury?

Does the Minister, as a veteran himself, agree that part of the veterans strategy ought to be the protection of former service personnel against repeated re-investigation for their activities in past conflicts? I welcome the fact that the Government seem to be moving towards some sort of qualified statute of limitations approach, but may I urge them to bring their announcement to the Ten-Minute Rule Committee rather than simply putting it out as a written statement, as at the moment they are suggesting?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, but I think that I can say with confidence from the Chair that a written statement will simply not meet the needs of the case, given the appetite—I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point made by the Chairman of the Committee—and indeed by you, Mr Speaker—that the most important
issue with regard to veterans is protecting them from lawfare and legal witch-hunting? It is absolutely imperative that the Secretary of State makes an oral statement to the House tomorrow, so that all Members from across the House can question her on her proposals, which I am sure we will welcome given half a chance.

Mr Ellwood: So many Members have rightly congratulated the Defence Secretary, but this is the first time that the fact that she is a reservist in the naval reserve has been credited. That leaves just one member of the Defence Front Bench team who is not in uniform at the moment, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). So, no pressure on him to join one element of the forces. On my right hon. Friend’s substantive question, the point has been made and the Defence Secretary will be in her place tomorrow.

Safeguarding Military Technology

12. Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What discussions she has had with (a) the Department for Education and (b) Five Eyes partners on safeguarding military technology developed in UK universities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is clearly important that we provide appropriate protection for sensitive research with defence or security applications, whether conducted in our universities or in industry. That is why we work closely with other Government Departments, agencies and international partners to ensure suitably robust arrangements which keep pace with developments in technology and the wider global context.

Julia Lopez: Recent media reports have highlighted increasing concerns about scientists linked to the People’s Liberation Army working in UK universities on research relevant to the development of sensitive military technologies. Does the Minister share that concern? Is he working with universities to mitigate the risk of financial dependency on, or the sharing of sensitive technologies with China? Will clearer guidance be developed on academic areas deemed relevant to national security?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. I can confirm that we work very closely with universities to inform them of the risk posed by military-civilian research fusion. Universities are subject to the UK’s strategic export controls, as is everyone else in the UK, and should consult the Department for International Trade before engaging in any relationships focusing on technology that could have a military application. Further guidance is available on the gov.uk website.

Defence Manufacturing

13. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support UK defence manufacturing.

24. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to maintain the capabilities of UK defence manufacturing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): The 2015 strategic defence and security review introduced a new national security objective to promote UK prosperity. We subsequently published strategies for shipbuilding and combat air, and refreshed our defence industrial policy with a new emphasis on supporting growth and competitiveness. On 14 March, we provided an update to Parliament on our ambitious defence prosperity programme.

Mark Pawsey: Last week, the Secretary of State described our Type 26 frigates as the envy of the world. They are powered by the most capable and quietest electric drive motors, which are designed and made by GE in Rugby. Is the Minister as delighted as I am at today’s news that the Ministry of Defence is bringing forward orders for the motors for the second batch of those vessels, which will enable this vital facility to remain here in the UK?

Stuart Andrew: May I first praise my hon. Friend for the work he has done to fight for the factory in his constituency? I could not walk down a corridor without bumping into him and him lobbying hard. That was why I made sure that I met GE. I am pleased to inform him that this morning GE announced to its staff that it has reached an agreement with the Ministry of Defence that will enable the company to continue its work in his constituency. I also pay tribute to my officials, who have worked incredibly hard on this matter to ensure that the machines continue in Rugby.

Mark Menzies: Delivery of the Tempest programme, as driven by BAE Systems in Warton, is essential to managing the future military air requirements of the United Kingdom. Can the Minister confirm continued Government support for the combat air strategy, as outlined by the Prime Minister at Farnborough?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend secured a debate just last week on this very issue and is obviously fighting very hard for his constituents who work at BAE Systems. The Government continue to deliver the combat air strategy which, as he says, was launched at Farnborough last year. That is a big piece of work, which is looking at the future air combat system technology initiative. The Government will continue to look at all innovative technologies that will need to be available, while we explore a broad range of options to deliver capability.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The cross-party report on shipbuilding recommended that the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships are built in British shipyards—that is absolutely vital and enjoys cross-party support. Has the Minister read the report, and will he meet the officers of the all-party group to take forward our recommendations?

Stuart Andrew: I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and others who have shown an interest in this. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently conducting a review into the MARS—military afloat reach and sustainability—tankers to see how we can learn from that and maximise the opportunities that will exist for the supply chain in the UK.
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): In recent days, we have heard of foreign shipbuilders pulling out of the bidding process for the fleet solid support ships. If the Government are being true to the national shipbuilding strategy, will the Minister accept that time is of the essence for not only the support ships but the bidding process for the Type 31 frigates? I know of a yard that has the skills, experience, talent and infrastructure to build those ships for the UK—we are good to go in Rosyth, so, for the sake of jobs and the industry, will the Minister start signing the contracts?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Type 31. Of course, that is a UK-only competition and we will wait for the results later this year. On the fleet solid support ships, I am pleased that a UK consortium is in there. I can confirm that Fincantieri has withdrawn from the competition, but I am not going to comment on any other entrants, because it is purely speculation at this stage.

Topical Questions

T1. [910991] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): Full and effective global compliance with the chemical weapons convention remains a priority for the Ministry of Defence. The use of chemical weapons in Syria by the Assad regime has caused extreme human suffering. A leader who uses chemical weapons against their own people should face the consequences, and we remain committed to supporting the troop-contributing nations and the training for the peacekeeping mission. I know that she took a huge amount of abuse for saying that, but I ask her to stick to her guns and not wobble on that, and I thank her for it.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces has outlined the work that is being done to increase recruitment and retention in our armed forces, but part of that is about talking up and explaining what our armed forces do. I sincerely wish that more people followed the hon. Lady’s lead and supported our armed forces, saying why they are important to society, social mobility and everything that this great nation stands for.

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the budget, we need to look at the behaviours that have resulted in previous SDSRs not being fulfilled—I dwelled on that in my speech at the sea power conference. We need more transparency about the costs and exactly where it will take to deepen our partnership with industry to ensure the long order books that reduce the cost of procurement. We know what needs to be done, and that should be our focus, as well as talking to the Treasury.

T4. [910994] Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): Veterans of national service feel that their service has been unrecognised over many years. What plans does the Secretary of State have to recognise veterans who were forced to join up under national service?

Penny Mordaunt: If my hon. Friend has particular suggestions, I would be interested to hear them. Where the MOD recognises that things have not previously been done as they should have, it has a track record of rectifying those situations, so I would be happy to discuss this with him if he has particular proposals in mind.

T2. [910992] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In January, the former Secretary of State paid a visit to Somaliland, which was very well received. Does the new Secretary of State share his opinion of the strategic importance of Somaliland—are we looking to set up a naval base there, for example? Moreover, does she agree that recognition of Somaliland is the way forward if we are to establish such a relationship?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I will not comment on future deployments, but I would say, having visited Somalia, though not Somaliland, that we need to understand the strategic importance to the UK of that part of the world, not least given its position on our trade routes—most of our trade does indeed go past that part of the world. That is why we remain committed to supporting the troop-contributing nations and the training for the peacekeeping mission.
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the Procurement Minister please confirm that the Type 31e frigate is still intended for export and, if so, that early defence export sales talks have been had at the Department for International Trade on specifications and timing, so that this “made in Britain” ship can boost allied fleets around the world in due course?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I can absolutely confirm that, hence (Stuart Andrew): I can absolutely confirm that, hence

Mark Lancaster: Off the top of my head, I would say that about 75,000 will be trained and 7,000 untrained. However, it is important to understand that people begin by being trained to be infantry soldiers and then go beyond that. If, for example, they are joining a technical corps such as the Royal Engineers or the Royal Corps of Signals, the point at which they become fully trained can be even further down the line.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The hon. Gentleman touches on an important point. When I served, there was no transition process; now, when someone puts their hand up and says they are departing, they go through what can be a two-year programme to get ready for civilian street. Thankfully, 95% of those who go through the programme end up either in work or back in education. That is a great statistic. He is absolutely right about mental health as well, and there is a focus on that. Mental Health Awareness Week last week was an opportunity to make veterans aware that if they required support it was there to be found.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that question, because it highlights the fact that it is not the MOD that provides veterans support but NHS services across the country. Each NHS authority should have a transition, intervention and liaison service designed to help those who require mental health support. If they need advanced support, there are complex mental health facilities as well.

T.5. [911000] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Aircraft such as Poseidon and Rivet Joint that are coming onstream rely on a boom refuelling system. What assessment have Ministers made of the requirement for fitting a boom refuelling capability to the aircraft refuelling fleet at Brize Norton, either through retrofitting or with new airframes?

Penny Mordaunt: These aircraft have an endurance that will enable them to meet the requirement for core UK missions without the need for air-to-air refuelling. For extended endurance missions, they are fitted with boom refuelling receptacles, and our allies can also provide air-to-air refuelling as required.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to Rock2Recovery, and to my hon. Friend for his support for it. It is one of the more than 400 service-facing military charities that do such an excellent job, not only in providing activities such as sport but in giving veterans who require support a new chapter and a focus. I give thanks to it for the work that it has done, and I thank all the other charities that do exactly the same.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): The Royal United Services Institute has confirmed that the UK will not be able to replicate many of the security benefits of EU membership if we leave. It has also been confirmed that Russian hackers have attacked media, telecoms and energy companies. Will the Secretary of State give us an assessment of the capacity that we will lose as a result of leaving the EU, and outline the Government’s costed proposals?

Penny Mordaunt: Although we are leaving the EU, European defence co-operation does not end. Recent deployments in Poland and Estonia demonstrate that we are continuing that co-operation, and it will be enhanced.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, Care after Combat does amazing and successful work in rehabilitating veterans who find themselves in the criminal justice system. What role
does she see for that organisation as part of the veterans strategy? How can we enable it to continue its work, and boost it as much as we can?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has mentioned another of the excellent charities that do such a great job. The focus that the new Defence Secretary has given us is on seeing what more we can do to get veterans to support other veterans, and that is exactly what Care after Combat does. I am also pleased to see such charities working together more closely through the co-ordination of Cobseo.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Our armed forces personnel, like all public servants, have been undervalued for too long by this Tory Government. The value of their pay has plummeted in recent years, and now we are seeing another delay in their pay award. When will the Government recognise that those who are in the frontline of protecting our people can do it without money worries? When will they lift the public sector pay cut and sort out this mess?

Penny Mordaunt: The Armed Forces Pay Review Body is about to report, and we will obviously look at that issue, but let me gently say to the hon. Gentleman that esteem for our armed forces is evident in all parts of the House, and I wish it were slightly more evident among some of his hon. Friends.

Suella Braverman (Farham) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post, and thank her for all the work that she has done for the Navy in Portsmouth, from which Fareham has benefited greatly.

I recently met serving members of our forces in Fareham, who raised serious concerns about service family accommodation and, in particular, problems with CarillionAmey and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation. Will the Minister meet me so that we can review these matters and our brave servicemen and women can be housed appropriately and with dignity?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for rising such an important issue. If we are to look after our armed forces, if we want to achieve our recruitment numbers, and if we want to ensure that we have the armed forces we want and the country expects, we must look after them not just on the battlefield and not just through training, but off the battlefield and through welfare, and that means building the right accommodation for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A very small number of Members more wish to speak; one sentence each.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Just last week I read that another veteran in Hull had taken his own life after failing to be supported adequately. Please will the Minister look to publish the statistics on veteran suicide on a regional basis, so that we can see the extent of the problem and how we can best support people who have given so much for us?

Mr Ellwood: Every suicide is a tragedy, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right: we need to better understand the numbers that are coming through. I am pleased to say that those who join the armed forces are less likely to consider suicide and to be affected by mental health issues and drug issues and so forth, but if someone goes down that road—if they are affected by those issues—help must be available, and that comes with understanding the situation. We are working with Manchester University to better understand the statistics, and I will also be speaking to Justice Ministers to see how we can get the numbers from coroners, match them with our databases and see for sure the exact background of those who have taken their lives.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the men and women of the King’s Royal Hussars battle group in Estonia for the terrific work they are doing in reassuring our NATO allies of our full commitment to the NATO alliance?

Mark Lancaster: I had the enormous pleasure of visiting that battle group only last week in Estonia and was tremendously impressed not least by the way it is demonstrating our interoperability with our NATO allies.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What steps is the Secretary of State going to take to minimise or indeed eradicate the practice of double counting spending in both the 0.7% aid target and the 2% NATO military spending target?

Penny Mordaunt: I think I will have to issue an explanatory note for the hon. Gentleman. If we are trying to spend ODA money on things that are not ODA eligible, it is not ODA; it is as simple as that. We do not mark our own homework on either ODA spend or the NATO 2% commitment, and instead of asking these questions repeatedly at both International Development and Defence questions the hon. Gentleman should take some pride in the fact that the United Kingdom makes both those commitments.

Mr Speaker: These are extremely important matters, and in the name of their intelligibility to people who are not Members of the House I should point out that ODA in this context is not “odour,” but rather ODA—official development assistance—for the avoidance of a scintilla of doubt.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the mental health care services for veterans available in South Leicestershire and the wider east midlands?

Mr Ellwood: Part of the purpose of Mental Health Awareness Week was to raise awareness of where veterans can seek help. As I touched on earlier, every regional NHS authority must have a transition, intervention and liaison service programme in place. What we need to do better is communicating that to our veterans so that when they are down in a very dark place they know where help can be found. We are working with the charities on that to make sure we can further improve the communication.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In Cranhill this morning I met an Afghanistan veteran who has profound mental health issues but has been found to be on the low rate of personal independence payment. Will the Minister work with me to make representations to
the Department for Work and Pensions to make sure that we look after this veteran and get him justice and what he really deserves from the DWP?

Mr Ellwood: First, we now keep track of those who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq in a way that we have not done before, so we are having a much better relationship with veterans after they depart service. I will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this issue in more detail. It is important that those who are affected by any aspects of mental health issues receive support from this country—from a very grateful nation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) rose—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Two notable parliamentary celebrities have risen to their feet: the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence and a former Minister for the Armed Forces. It is very awkward—[Interruption.] No, you are too modest, Dr Lewis; I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis: As a naval reservist herself, will the Secretary of State personally look into the removal of the captain of HMS Queen Elizabeth, apparently on the grounds of what might have been a misunderstanding about the use of a car supplied by the Ministry of Defence? If we lose talented people like this, surely it is not only unjust but a waste of all the investment made in someone’s 29-year unblemished career in the Royal Navy.

Penny Mordaunt: I can assure my right hon. Friend that I am fully aware of the situation and that I understand his concern when we have invested in an individual and they are unable to carry out the tasks for which they have trained. The officer remains within the Royal Navy and it is a matter for the Royal Navy to deal with, which it is doing.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is very familiar with Portsmouth, but will she make sure that one of her first Royal Navy visits is to Devonport so that she can maintain a similar familiarity with the expertise and skills that we have in Plymouth?

Penny Mordaunt: If you are Royal Navy reservist, you cannot avoid being familiar with Plymouth. I would be very happy also to visit Faslane and Plymouth, our other navy bases besides Portsmouth.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but we have to hear the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

Mr Francois: Bless you, Mr Speaker. Several weeks ago, I tabled a named-day question to the Department asking how many soldiers were enlisted into the Regular Army in 2018-19 but, unless I have missed it, I have not even had a holding reply. As this relates to my great friends Crapita, when can I expect an answer to that question, even though we all know that the answer will be embarrassing?

Mark Lancaster: Promptly.

Mr Speaker: Yes—that is a matter of interpretation. We are grateful.
Use of Torture Overseas

3.41 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if she will make a statement on the Ministry of Defence’s policy on co-operating with the use of torture overseas.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The UK Government stand firmly against torture and do not participate in, solicit, encourage or condone the use of torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment for any purpose. Our policy and activities in this area are in accordance with domestic and international law. The Ministry of Defence’s policy is aligned with the Government’s policy on sharing and receiving intelligence, and the Investigatory Powers Commissioner has been satisfied with our activities and has not identified issues of concern. However, the Prime Minister has asked the commissioner to review the Government’s consolidated guidance and submit proposals for any updated guidance that is published.

Mr Davis: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Our most senior living soldier, Field Marshal Lord Guthrie, said 10 years ago:

“Torture is illegal. It is a crime in both peace and war that no exceptional circumstances can permit...We need to distinguish ourselves from our enemies. We must not, in the false name of moral equivalence, degrade ourselves to their level.”

He was right. The prohibition of torture is one of our few absolute incontrovertible rights. There can never be a reason or justification for torture; what is more, it does not work. It leads to bad intelligence and bad decisions. The decision to undertake the Iraq war, which led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, the destruction of the stability of the region and the destruction of the reputation of the west, was based on so-called evidence obtained on the basis of torture.

We cannot ignore the morality or the law. Paragraph 15.9 of the Ministry of Defence’s policy document states that information sharing should not proceed “unless ministers agree that the potential benefits justify accepting the risk and the legal consequences that may follow”. The fundamental problem with paragraph 15.9 is that it presumes that Ministers can override the law, even international law, including that on absolute rights such as the prohibition of torture: they cannot, they must not, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will ensure that they do not.

Given the Ministry of Defence’s claim that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office, the investigatory powers oversight body, approves of this, will she publish the documents showing that? It seems to me that the IPCO might have approved the overall approach but not the precise policy document that I refer to, which I understand was published after the consultation. Will she ensure that that document, which appears to give Ministers the right to override the law, is published along with any commentary on it?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for applying for this urgent question. It is a critical issue. I agree 100% with what he said, and it is worth reminding ourselves that these laws and norms protect not just the enemy but our own armed forces. We cannot overrule the law, nor can Ministers be advised to overrule or disregard the law.

As I said, we have an opportunity to review the matter. I want to wait until the commissioner’s advice has been received. I understand that will take only a few weeks, so I will update the House as we review our guidance.

I understand that following a freedom of information request one of the policy iterations has been placed in the public domain. The latest iteration, from 2018, introduces not any substantial changes but a minor change at the request of the IPCO. These matters should receive the full light of day and full transparency. If my right hon. Friend will bear with me, once I receive the advice I will of course update the House on these important issues.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Today’s revelations that the MOD has discreetly rewritten Government policy on torture are extremely concerning. Torture is not only morally reprehensible but prohibited under international law in the universal declaration of human rights, the international covenant on civil and political rights, and the convention against torture.

There can be no justification whatsoever for torture. None the less, today’s reports suggest that, according to the Ministry of Defence, torture is acceptable if, and I quote from the policy document, “ministers agree that the potential benefits justify accepting the risk and the legal consequences that may follow”.

Will the Secretary of State confirm what the Government consider those “potential benefits” to be?

In response to the reports, the MOD has denied any wrongdoing, maintaining that the “policy and activities in this area comply with the Cabinet Office’s consolidated guidance” on torture.

However, that guidance clearly sets out that “in no circumstance will UK personnel ever take action amounting to torture”.

It further maintains that where the Government cannot mitigate the serious risk of torture at the hands of a third party, the “presumption would be that we will not proceed”.

Will the Secretary of State therefore clarify how her Department has come to its conclusion? What legal advice has it received? Will she now publish this advice, if any?

We understand that the policy came into effect in November 2018. How many times since then has a Minister decided to authorise the transmission of intelligence that may have led to torture? No Minister should authorise any action where there is a serious risk of it leading to torture. Will the Secretary of State therefore now do the right thing and commit to scrapping the policy immediately, so as to ensure that basic human rights and international law are universally respected and upheld?
Penny Mordaunt: I can give the hon. Lady the assurances that she wants. It is not our policy to condone torture or to facilitate it—quite the reverse, as I set out earlier. No Ministers have been involved in decisions that would have led to that, and it is clear that that is not our intention. Again, I can check that, but that is the assurance that I have received from the Department. I can understand the concerns that have been expressed across the House. People will appreciate that I understand well why such laws and norms are in place. As I said, they are for everyone’s benefit, not just our enemies’.

I undertake to look at the guidance and review it, but it is prudent to wait for the commissioner’s feedback. If it was going to take a long time to arrive, I would take a different view, but it is imminent—a few weeks’ time.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Surely my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has done the House a big service in securing this urgent question because it touches on the reputation of our country.

You, Mr Speaker, will remember that on 2 July 2018 my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) led Members from both sides of the House in asking for a judicial inquiry into British complicity in torture, and the Government promised to update the House within 60 days. Now, it is day 323 and, in spite of that promise the House has not been given the explanation it requires.

Last Friday, the United Nations Committee Against Torture called on the UK “to establish without further delay an inquiry on alleged acts of torture and other ill treatment of detainees held overseas committed by, at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of British officials.”

Given Britain’s leadership at the United Nations, it is a very sad day when the UN has felt it necessary to pass such a motion. I urge the Government to deliver on their promise to the House and come back on the issue of a judicial inquiry. As I say, it was promised within 60 days and we are now on day 323.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend raises some important points. Although I completely agree with what has been said by everyone who has spoken so far, it is right to point out that we hold our armed forces, and the agencies that work with them, to high standards—we hold them all to high standards. We understand why that is important, we understand why people must be compliant and we understand why there must be accountability and transparency in these policies not just on matters of intelligence but in targeting them to reduce the number of civilian casualties.

Part of the reason we are grappling with the issue of “lawfare” is that we want to uphold the primacy of international humanitarian law. These things are incredibly important to us.

I have undertaken to review this policy, and I will look at things more widely and in the round, but I reassure the House that what I do not want to come from the scrutiny of MOD policy, which is quite right, is any suggestion that our armed forces are somehow not upholding international humanitarian law.

I know that Members on both sides of the House will know how much that is embedded in our armed forces’ education and training, and how it is given with rigour in everything they do before deployment. Where there is wrongdoing, they are held to account, and it is quite right that we should hold them and officials to account for wrongdoing where it happens. This is not a regular occurrence, and it is not something that occurs within our armed forces—they operate to the highest standards.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): A tangled web has been woven that needs to be unpicked with the greatest transparency. Why did it fall to the non-governmental organisation Reprieve to get this information into the public domain? Why did no one in Government think it appropriate to pass it to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner?

The Secretary of State says she will review the policy, but will she not go one step further and rescind it? Will she clarify the MOD statement, which she repeated at the Dispatch Box today, that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner is “entirely satisfied” with the Department’s activities and standards in this area? Given that the commissioner had not seen the document until last month, how on earth can he be completely satisfied with something he knew nothing about?

Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to confirm whether she believes that, as per the guidance we are discussing, Ministers can authorise UK action where there is a serious risk it will contribute to torture? In the authorship of this policy, was the Attorney General consulted at any time? It is quite clear that the House will not accept any deviation from the strictest observance of domestic and international law.

Finally, with last month seeing a UK Defence Secretary sacked for leaking from the National Security Council, this month we find out that the MOD is potentially freelancing on torture and potentially breaking the law. Many of us are left asking, what on earth is going on in the Secretary of State’s Department?

Penny Mordaunt: I can understand the concerns that have been expressed about a policy, but it cannot be down from that that action is being taken or incidents have happened. What I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that this policy is not new, nor has it been secret. The Prime Minister asked the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to review the guidance, and the commissioner has seen the MOD’s policy. What I said is that he has no issue and believes the MOD’s current policy is consistent with that guidance.

I repeat that no Minister could break the law or be advised to break the law by an official—that could not happen. I hope that reassures the hon. Gentleman on that point. The Attorney General is routinely and regularly involved in forming policies of this nature, and is also a member of the National Security Council.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I endorse what my right hon. Friend has said: the idea that this is some extraordinary leak displaying some novel policy is wholly erroneous. If anybody wishes to read the Intelligence and Security Committee’s report on detention and rendition, they will find a lengthy section on current issues that deals with this precise matter, setting out the consolidated guidance in virtually identical form to that which exists and, I understand, is currently being used in the MOD.

That said, I welcome the Secretary of State’s review, and I point out that in the detention and rendition report my Committee made it clear that this was one of
those exceptional areas dealing with serious risk. You can never authorise or sanction the use of torture—it is wholly contrary to international law—but we pointed out that where there is a serious risk there was a need for some form of process by which an evaluation could be made. It was noteworthy that there appeared to be differences, at the time we reported, between the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the MOD on what criteria might be applied by individual Secretaries of State. May I urge my right hon. Friend, first, enthusiastically to rebut those who suggest that this is an extraordinary revelation and, secondly, to move to respond to what the Committee suggested in its report?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that contribution, and I completely agree with what he says. In addition to the review of the policy, I will certainly give the matters he raises my urgent attention.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): This matter might not be news to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and his Committee, but it does appear to have been news to IPCO, which had to be informed about it by freedom of information requests through Reprieve. Perhaps the Secretary of State will explain that. Does it not show that the lessons from the whole so-called “war on terror” have not been learned? She gave a long answer to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), but she did not answer his actual question: when are we going to have the announcement on the judge-led inquiry?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, the change to the policy introduced in 2018 was an amendment at the request of the IPCO. As I say, it is only a short number of weeks before we will get the review back from the Commissioner, and the Government will be able to look at the recommendations made. I will look at this in the round, as Members would expect of a new Secretary of State coming into the Department, and I will update the House. I fully hear what all Members in all parts of the House are saying. I understand, and I hope the House has confidence in the fact that I understand, how critically important these issues are, for, as I say again, the safety of our own armed forces, as well as other people, and I will give this my urgent attention.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): If anyone ever tries to tempt the Secretary of State with the maxim that the end justifies the means, will she bear in mind the wise words of Sir Robert Thompson? He was probably the leading counter-insurgency expert of the 1960s and wrote about torture and other extrajudicial means:

> “Not only is this morally wrong, but, over a period, it will create more practical difficulties for a government than it solves. A government which does not act in accordance with the law forfeits the right to be called a government and cannot then expect its people to obey the law.”

**Penny Mordaunt:** I quite agree with my right hon. Friend: it is absolutely fundamental to everything that we stand for and everything that our armed forces represent that we uphold the law, that we uphold international humanitarian law and that we abide by the rules. I could not agree with him more.
follows—it is absolutely in line with that. I am told that it will be a couple of weeks before the commissioner is ready to report. When they do report, the Government will review it and I will review the MOD’s policy.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I invite the Secretary of State to respond specifically to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) about the Government’s response to the call for a judicial review. We cannot blame her for the failures of her predecessor, but we heard that the promise of a response within 60 days was made about 320 days ago. Will she make it clear that she will now put that right and that the House will hear her view on that and let us know when we should expect to hear it?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I am a couple of weeks into this role. I am looking at this situation, but I will not make pronouncements at the Dispatch Box until I am apprised of all the issues. I do not think that hon. Members would expect me to do anything else. I can assure the House that I am looking at the issue and at policy in relation to that. From what I have seen and from the inquiries that I have made in the Department so far, I think that the House would be reassured about our conduct. I think that the decisions that have been taken in the Department have been correct and that hon. Members would be reassured by that fact. But I fully appreciate that the House wants to have an update as swiftly as possible and I undertake to do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State outline her understanding of the definition of torture, underline the position in a civilised society and, coming from a position of clean hands, confirm that the end does not and will not always justify the means?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that I have given the House every reassurance. There is a legal definition of torture. At the beginning of my statement, I outlined all the descriptions and forms that that might take. It is never justified. It is also, as we know, not a reliable way of getting information or of being able to act on that information. We must not do it. Ministers should not do it, or allow it to be done. It is a breach of the law and no official could advise a Minister to take that course of action.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State seeks to reassure the House, but Members may be aware that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office consultation included guidance on intelligence sharing relating to detainees closed on 28 November 2018, yet the MOD policy was simply dated November 2018. Therefore, was it introduced on 28, 29, or 30 November to avoid being included in the IPCO consultation?

Penny Mordaunt: My understanding is that it followed that updated advice and the changes made to the 2018 document were at the request of the IPCO. That is my understanding of the situation, but that should not be confused with the piece of work that has been ongoing with the commissioner and on which a report back is due, as I have said, in a few weeks.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As we heard from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), in the course of its inquiry, the Intelligence and Security Committee asked a number of Secretaries of State whether they believed the policy allowed them to authorise action where there was a serious risk of torture and each gave significantly different answers. Can the Secretary of State explain how she will be able to ensure that there is a consistent approach to this from all Secretaries of State?

Penny Mordaunt: The confidence that the right hon. Gentleman and other Members can get is that the processes in the Department have to be right. Clearly, different people coming into office and holding ministerial office will have different views on a raft of subjects. They may have different experiences that they bring to bear in making a decision, but the key thing that should give us confidence is that no member of our armed forces and no civil servant working in defence could give advice that would lead to a Minister to decide on a course of action that could lead to an individual being knowingly tortured. That, I think, is very clear. That has been my experience of the calibre of individuals working in the Department, both in the past few weeks and also in my time as Minister of the Armed Forces. Those are the people we have to trust. A duty on Ministers, especially the Secretary of State, is to reinforce that in the Department through policies, transparency and clarity on what it is that we are trying to achieve and the law that we are trying to uphold.
Ebola Outbreak: DRC

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): Ebola is back—this time in the eastern DRC. This is the largest outbreak in the country’s history, the second largest in the world and the first in a conflict zone. So far, 1,209 people have died, and we must do much more to grip the situation. It is not a simple question of virus control. If it were, we could simply repeat what we were able, at huge cost and risk, to do in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and even to some extent what the DRC Government and the World Health Organisation were able to do in Equateur and western DRC over the first six months of last year—that is, to get out into village after village, identify all the cases, trace all their contacts and the contacts of those contacts, and contain the outbreak through preventing further chains of transmission. But this situation is not like that.

This outbreak is in North Kivu, which is the centre of a conflict and is dominated by dozens of separate armed groups, largely outside Government control. Such groups have begun to attack and kill health workers, meaning that key international experts have had to be withdrawn from the epicentre of the virus. The decision not to allow this province to participate in the recent elections—partly on the grounds that it was an Ebola area—has fuelled suspicion that Ebola is a fabrication developed by hostile political forces. As a result, communities are reluctant to come forward when they have symptoms, to change burial practices or to accept the highly effective trial vaccine. The Congolese army and Government, which have successfully contained nine previous Ebola outbreaks over the last 45 years, are struggling to operate in the epicentre of this outbreak, as are the UN peacekeepers and the WHO. Although this area is dangerous and difficult to access, it is not sparsely populated. The epicentre of the outbreak is Butembo, which has a population of 1 million people, and the surrounding areas contain almost 18 million people.

According to all our expert analysis here, the current disease profile poses only a low to negligible risk to the United Kingdom, so this statement should not be a cause for panic here at home. However, this outbreak is potentially devastating for the region. It could spread easily to neighbouring provinces and even to neighbouring countries. I commend all those—both in the Congolese Government and the international community—who are working in very difficult situations to bring this disease under control. My predecessor, the current Defence Secretary, paid tribute to Dr Richard Valery Mouzoko Kiboung, who was killed in an attack by an armed group on 19 April while working on the frontline for the WHO’s Ebola response. I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Dr Richard and to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of this outbreak.

We now need to grip this situation and ensure that the disease is contained. As Members can imagine, this has been my key priority in the emergency field since I was appointed to this role just over two weeks ago. I spent the weekend in discussions with UN humanitarian co-ordinator Sir Mark Lowcock and with the Director General of the WHO, Dr Tedros, who has personally paid eight visits to the affected area so far. I have also spoken about the response to the Deputy Secretary-General of the UN, Amina Mohammed. I am pleased to see that there has been a real step-up in terms of the UN staff on the ground regarding co-ordination and the seniority of those staff, particularly in places such as Butembo. Both the Health Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have been supporting this agenda in meetings over the past four days—the G7 health ministry meeting and the WHO meetings in Geneva.

I have convened a meeting with a number of international experts in the field, including Brigadier Kevin Beaton, who helped to lead the UK military response in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the chief medical adviser to the UK Government. I have concluded, on the basis of their advice, that we need to provide more money immediately, not only to support the frontline response—the health workers—but to support the vaccination strategy and to put more of our expert staff on the ground into the response. This is not just about recruiting doctors. We need people who understand and can work with the DRC Government, the military and even the opposition forces in order to create the space for us to work. We need people who know the UN system well so that they can drive and shape the UN response.

These people need to be not in London but on the ground, because they need to be able to learn and adapt very quickly as the disease spreads. We are already deploying epidemiologists through our public health rapid support teams, in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care. I am also now considering deploying officials with specialities in information management, adaptive management, anthropology and strategic communications. It is, however, important for us all to understand that this is not a problem that the international community can solve from a distance. This is a political and security crisis as much as a health crisis, and the response must, in the end, be driven by local health workers and leaders.

There are some positive signs. DFID has been a key player in developing a new experimental vaccine for Ebola that is proving highly effective. Over 119,000 doses have been administered in eastern DRC—an achievement that has probably saved thousands of lives. Modelling from Yale suggests that the use of the vaccine has reduced the geographic spread of Ebola by nearly 70%. This is not just about statistics. It is about, for example, Danielle, a 42-day-old baby in eastern Congo who survived Ebola last week thanks to the inspiring work of community volunteers, themselves Ebola survivors, and frontline health workers, supported by UK Aid.

Of course, we cannot do this alone. It needs grip and urgency, but it also needs humility. One of the reasons I have been talking in detail about this issue to Mark Green, my US opposite number, is not only that we share the US’s analysis but that the Americans will inevitably be major players in this response in terms of finance and expertise, as indeed they were in the Liberia Ebola outbreak. We need many more international donors to match our financial contributions and to sustain the international and local health operations in the field. That is why the UK has just hosted an event specifically on Ebola to build support for the response in the World Health Assembly in Geneva. It is also why I have agreed that my colleague, the Africa Minister, should visit eastern DRC immediately.
[Rory Stewart]

This is a very dangerous situation where the Ebola virus is only one ingredient in a crisis that is fuelled by politics, community suspicion and armed violence. We need to act fast and we need to act generously. But above all, we need the right people on the ground who are completely on top of the situation and able to come up with quick solutions and to guide us in keeping up the support for—and, yes, sometimes the pressure on—the UN system, on non-governmental organisation, on opposition politicians and on the Government of the DRC to get this done. The stakes are very high. I will keep the House updated on our response.

4.19 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for its comprehensive nature. I would like to start by joining him in commending all those who are working to fight this outbreak, honouring Dr Richard Kiboung, who was killed last month, and expressing our deepest sympathies to all those who have lost their lives to the latest Ebola outbreak in the DRC.

The death toll currently exceeds 1,000 people, and as the number of confirmed cases continues to rise, this deadly and cruel virus is certain to claim more lives in the days and weeks to come. The World Health Organisation has said it is unlikely that the virus will be contained, so its spread into neighbouring countries is not only possible but likely. This assessment from the WHO means that the world must act fast to prevent catastrophic outcomes, given the speed with which Ebola can contaminate and kill. David Miliband, who recently visited the region, confirmed that “the Ebola outbreak is getting worse, not better, despite a proven vaccine and treatment.”

Through the Department for International Development, the UK is already playing its role in the response and making a difference on the ground, as it has done in previous outbreaks. Real credit is due to DFID’s staff and all responders for their tireless work and commitment. I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State is discussing further action that DFID can take with other donor countries. Every day is crucial, and getting the response right is imperative. It is not simply a matter of issuing more money or resources. Given the complex security context laid out by the Secretary of State, a more hands-on and strategic approach is urgently needed.

It has been widely reported that one of the major barriers to delivering the necessary response is the breakdown of trust between the affected community and those trying to lead the response. A quarter of people in the region believe that the Ebola virus does not exist, and a third think that it was fabricated for financial gain. Foreigners have been accused of bringing misinformation and secure negotiated access to the community? Can he tell us more about his discussions on supporting efforts to stop the current rumour mill of misinformation and secure negotiated access to the affected population?

What more can the Secretary of State do to reduce the problematic dependence on armed escorts and military involvement in the implementation of humanitarian activities? Agencies active on the ground report a major difficulty being that actors involved in the Ebola response are the very same actors who have played a long-standing role in the ongoing conflict in the region. Can he give an assurance that he will uphold the principles laid out in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines, which state that military and civil defence assets should only ever be employed by humanitarian agencies as a last resort? Crucially, while we want to see everything done to get this emergency situation under control, does he agree that prevention is better than emergency response and that we must provide long-term support to ensure that the DRC can build appropriate public health systems for the future?

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his moving and well-informed response to the statement; it is clearly very well informed by some of the actors on the ground. I will reply specifically to two of his questions.

On stepping up co-ordination, an assistant secretary-general of the UN is now operating out of Butembo with a broader co-ordination role for the different UN agencies. We have reached out to opposition leaders, who yesterday made the first in a series of statements to communities to encourage them to come forward to report cases. This is really important because those opposition leaders were at least complicit passively in allowing the rumours to spread that Ebola was somehow an invention of the Government, so there has been a very important shift. We want to thank those opposition leaders for coming forward and making those statements, and we would encourage them to make more such statements. Clearly, the Ebola response should not be politicised and should not be caught up in people’s disagreements with this particular Government in Kinshasa.

On the military-security relationship, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we should be using military personnel only as a last resort, but it is very difficult situation. Nearly 200 separate insurgencies are taking place in the DRC—in particular, the Allied Democratic Forces and the Mai-Mai groups, which are operating in North Kivu and the surrounding areas—which, as we have said, have killed a doctor, mounted at least two attacks on Médecins sans Frontières facilities and attacked up to 40 other health facilities. With these kinds of problems, and when we are protecting our health workers not just from the risk of getting Ebola itself—health workers are of course among the individuals most at
risk of contracting Ebola—but literally protecting them from being shot or attacked, it is understandable that in certain cases we need to work either with UN troops or the army of the DRC to address this outbreak.

We need to be very realistic about what this whole situation means. Part of that is resilience and, absolutely, investment in the public health facilities in the DRC. However, we should remember that the DRC Government have dealt with nine previous outbreaks. In fact, Ebola is named after a river in the DRC, and it was first discovered because of an outbreak in the DRC. The Congolese army and the DRC Government actually have a huge amount of experience in dealing with this. Their failure to grip it here is specifically about the conflict in North Kivu, rather than necessarily about their having the skills and experience to deal with it.

Finally, we need to invest in resilience in the neighbouring countries to make sure that were the disease—God forbid—to move into Uganda, Burundi or Rwanda, we have the proper response in place to contain it in each of them.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Last time I was in Uganda, I was shown the preparations that were being made in case Ebola did come across the border, but I did not feel they were adequate enough. There was one bed, as part of a health facility, which just had a curtain around it. Will my right hon. Friend explain what we are doing to help, because this will not respect the border of a country and it will cross? Will the Secretary of State explain exactly what we are doing to help the countries bordering the DRC to stop it spreading into their country?

Rory Stewart: The answer is that we have much more experience now than we did 10 years ago of dealing with this, particularly because of the experience in Sierra Leone and Liberia. That means partly that we are giving money to agencies such as Oxfam so that it can provide its own experts in the field and support to the WHO both in resilience preparedness and in work with the public health authorities in those countries. We know what we are doing: we have the skills; and we know how to run a good technical Ebola clinic. I am very concerned to hear this news from Uganda and I am very happy to look at the individual case, but we certainly can do much better than that and we generally are doing much better than that.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): May I thank the Secretary of State for pre-sight of his oral statement? Thanks are due in no small measure to those who are already working on the ground. That point was made by the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), and indeed by the Secretary of State.

With 1,600 cases and almost 1,200 deaths, the outbreak in the DRC is the second largest in history. It has a 67% fatality rate 10 months after it began, and the case numbers are still rising and escalating as we speak. As we know, the disease disproportionately affects women, in 55% of cases, and children, in 28% of cases. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has warned that it may have to scale back operations dramatically in the DRC because of underfunding and some of the security issues that the Secretary of State mentioned in his statement.

I have two questions for the Secretary of State. First, on vaccines, he might remember that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) noted in a recent article for The BMJ that “modern air travel means it is not possible to ignore infectious diseases that occur ‘far away’ as of no concern here.” Does he agree that vaccines are a key weapon in the fight against this disease, at home and abroad, and if so, what steps is his Department taking to combat the disinformation about vaccines worldwide? I think that problem is bigger than what we are dealing with today.

Secondly, during the west Africa epidemic of 2014 to 2016, funerals were a major source of Ebola transmission, causing almost 80% of infections in Sierra Leone. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that safe and speedy burials are provided across the worst affected areas?

Rory Stewart: There are three issues. First, I absolutely agree that we need to work very closely with everyone, including all Members of this House, to combat the very dangerous lies about vaccines. Vaccines are absolutely vital. They have transformed life expectancy around the world. We cannot allow conspiracy theories about vaccines to lead to unnecessary deaths.

Secondly, in eastern DRC, there are two types of vaccines available: one developed by Merck, and one developed by Johnson & Johnson. The trials of the Merck vaccine were very successful in Guinea. We are beginning to roll out the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. There is an issue with how long it takes to make these vaccines; because they still have to be biologically incubated through an egg, it can take between six and 12 months to create the vaccines. Pushing towards 350,000 over the next six months will therefore require enormous drive and effort.

Finally, on burial practices, we must ensure that we are anthropologically sensitive. Family members want to be able to see their loved ones before they bury them, so we have to bring them in wearing hazmat suits and ensure that they see the chlorine spraying of the body. In certain cases, in addition to wrapping the body, we need a clear site so that they can see the face, so that some of the rumours that have been going around about organ harvesting can be dealt with directly. In eastern DRC, this is about reassuring not only the family, but the broader community.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): One of the big problems is that that part of the world is characterised by a large number of refugees, due to the inherent instability of the region. How will my right hon. Friend tackle Ebola among refugees to ensure that it does not spread to other countries?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The ongoing conflict in eastern DRC, which has been going on for decades, involves Congolese citizens moving in large numbers into neighbouring countries, and some of the insurgent groups, such as the Allied Democratic Forces, are citizens of other countries—a lot of people originally born in Uganda and Rwanda are now fighting in eastern DRC. That means we need to deal with the situation in two ways. We need to think about those people returning to their host countries, but we also need to think about vaccinating within the camps for refugees and internally displaced people. Our aim will be to try to do a complete vaccination of those camps and communities.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituent Ben Thomas came to talk to me about this on Saturday. The combination of this terrible disease, in an area with 18 million people dominated by separate groups, as the Secretary of State described, out of Government control, with the conspiracy theories, reads like the nightmarish script of some disaster movie. How sure is he that the risk of this spreading and eventually coming to the UK is negligible, and what is he doing with other Departments to ensure that we are ready for such a possibility?

Rory Stewart: That, of course, is the central question. Our colleagues in public health conduct an analysis on a real-time basis and publish every two weeks their view of the risk to the United Kingdom. They publish the risk of vectors of transmission that they are aware of. They look at the fact that eastern DRC is a relatively remote area, with no direct flights to the United Kingdom, and there is a very limited number of people from the diaspora community of eastern DRC in Britain. However, if Ebola continues to spread, that fortnightly update will change. The current negligible risk could move up, which is why we need to watch this very closely. If it were to move to Uganda, two factors would come into play. Uganda has a better public health system, so it should be able to trace contact to contact and contain Ebola more rapidly, but there is the risk of the direct flights to the United Kingdom, so we need to keep the House updated very closely on that. At the moment, I think their assessment is correct. However, should the situation change, our assessment will need to change.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for their very measured and detailed statements and replies. May I ask the Secretary of State about the situation in Goma? As far as we know, there are no cases in Goma at the moment, but it is a very large population centre. It seems, from the information I have, that it is not well prepared. Should the disease reach Goma, that could have extremely dangerous consequences. Goma is home to large numbers of refugees, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out.

Rory Stewart: In terms of the worst-case scenarios we are looking at, Goma is a very serious situation. Butembo, as I explained to the House, has a population of 1 million. Goma is far larger. It is a considerable urban settlement and a major trading port right across to Rwanda. It would not be possible to vaccinate everybody in Goma. There are simply more millions of people than we have vaccines to insert. It is therefore very, very important that we contain the outbreak by ring-vaccination around the area of Butembo. If it moves to Goma, we will have to move to a totally different stage of response, so we must do all we can to prevent that happening.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which was very helpful. I understand that in Sierra Leone’s most recent Ebola outbreak nearly 10% of that country’s health professionals were killed. This disease can therefore have a huge impact on a country. The Secretary of State talked about much distrust surrounding this outbreak. Will he say more about what is being done to raise awareness and emphasise the impact of Ebola, so we can contain it?

Rory Stewart: There are two main lessons from Sierra Leone. The first is communication—in particular, making sure that anybody who is sick comes forward to report it and that they report their contacts honestly. We had a situation recently in eastern DRC where a baby was reported, but nobody traced the fact that the grandmother of the baby had actually had the disease. Contact tracing and reporting is essential. The second relates to safe burial practices and understanding very clearly the risks involved.

In terms of health workers, the big change from Sierra Leone is the vaccine. One of the great achievements that this Department has played a major role in is the final development of an Ebola vaccine, which, so far, has been very effective—over 90% effective. We are now vaccinating all health workers in the area as a matter of course, so that anyone who is in contact with a patient is vaccinated. That should make a huge difference to the transmission of the disease, because in Sierra Leone and Liberia it moved through health workers. The problem at the moment is traditional health workers, who are reluctant to come forward.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): For intervention to be decisive, clinical experts will have to be deployed at pace and at scale. Will the Secretary of State indicate what discussions he is having with our international counterparts to ensure that such resources, as are required from us and our allies, are deployed as quickly as possible?

Rory Stewart: From discussions in the Department, we have agreed a scale-up of the UK response. We have laid out the additional UK experts who want to go into the field. I have spoken to Mark Green, the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development. A retired US admiral who led their response in Liberia has just been out in the field in eastern DRC and has returned to Washington. I hope that a colleague will be able to meet him in Washington this coming week. The third thing is making sure, with Dr Tedros and Mark Lowcock from the WHO and the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, that we get the right UN experts in the field. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: more expertise, more quickly and closer to the epicentre is the key.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new role. He is perhaps that rare animal—a Minister who is respected on both sides of the House—so I wish him well. He will know that in 2014, the Ebola outbreak was classified as a public health emergency of international concern, as was the Zika outbreak in 2016. I assume that he is monitoring that. At what point does he think we might reach that stage, and what additional resources would that bring to tackle the outbreak?

Rory Stewart: That is a very good, technical question. Let me take the two responses in reverse order. First, we do not believe that the declaration would make a dramatic difference to the resources that we are able to deploy. In fact, we have just signed off on very significant additional resources. For various security reasons, I feel that we cannot talk about the exact sum, but we are putting much more resource into this operation. Secondly, we are monitoring this issue and the entire meeting last week was around that. It is an active question for the
discussion currently taking place at the World Health Assembly, and we will keep the House updated on the declaration of the emergency.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking up his role; the introduction of a Scot always helps matters in sensible decision making. My question is simple: in terms of mobilising all our forces and getting the vaccine on tap as quickly as possible, are we making the maximum use of one of our strengths, which is British academia? One thinks of Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Manchester, where we have some tremendous medical specialists.

Rory Stewart: The answer is yes. British academics are playing a very major role, but a lot of the Merck development has included not just British but American and Canadian academics. The point is well made. We are very proud in DFID that the quest for a universal snakebite vaccine, for example, will be led through the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and funded entirely with DFID money. That is an example of where I, as a Scot, would very much like to take this Department.

Point of Order

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following a previous point of order that I made to you, I and more than 110 other Members wrote to the chairman of the Conservative party and the Government Chief Whip on 19 March regarding comments made by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) in relation to historical sexual abuse. Two months later, neither has responded to me, so could you advise me further on what action I should take to get an answer on this important matter?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is: persist. The matter is not to be directly addressed from the Chair in the sense that as far as I know, it does not appertain to remarks made in the Chamber. That does not, in any sense, diminish its importance, but it does change the matter of the aegis within which it falls. It is not a matter upon which I can arbitrate. However, I champion the principle of courtesy between colleagues. If colleagues have written to the chairman of, in this case, the Conservative party, they are entitled to expect that a reply will be forthcoming, so my counsel to the hon. Lady—in so far as she requires it—is, as I said in my initial one-word reply: persist. Stick at it. Keep going. Do not take no or nothingness for an answer.

In a moment, I will call Heidi Allen to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.
Revoking Article 50

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

4.43 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Change UK): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the revocation of the UK’s article 50 notification to the European Union.

As we know, the Brexit landscape is shifting literally by the day, but there have been some significant events recently that I believe have altered the direction of travel. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have been locked for six weeks in cross-party talks that have facilitated no resolution whatsoever. The Prime Minister has now stated that she will bring back her withdrawal agreement for a fourth time on 3 June, and all indications are that it will fail again. That being the case, we know that the Conservative party has stated that it will then look for a new leader, and that means a new Prime Minister for this Government. The suggestion is that it is likely that that will be a hard Brexiteer, and that means a new Prime Minister for this Government. The suggestion is that it is likely that that will be a hard Brexiteer, and that means a new Prime Minister for this Government. The suggestion is that it is likely that that will be a hard Brexiteer, and that means a new Prime Minister for this Government.

It is comparatively rare for a colleague to fall so short of the three minutes but nevertheless to have conveyed the point. The House is grateful to her. I have listened carefully to her application. I am not persuaded that the amendment will extend to England and Wales. The House has voted twice to ensure it does not happen—recent events have dangerously reignited that possibility.

I remind everybody that no deal means no transition period, which would mean, the day after leaving, no rules on tariffs and goods, no free movement of people, no security arrangements, and goods—medicines, for example—not being regulated as today. It would end overnight. This would constitute a grave act of harm to our economy, our security and the health of the nation. If it has not been possible to secure a confirmatory vote by 31 October, the House will have to seriously consider revocation of article 50 to stop the clock and prevent a no-deal Brexit. Mr Speaker, I would be grateful to hear your view on whether we should have this emergency debate.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was admirably succinct. It is comparatively rare for a colleague to fall so short of the three minutes but nevertheless to have conveyed the point. The House is grateful to her. I have listened carefully to her application. I am not persuaded that the amendment will extend to England and Wales. The House has voted twice to ensure it does not happen—recent events have dangerously reignited that possibility.

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I have had such regard. I wanted her to have an opportunity to air this important point, and I have made this decision for now.

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill

Considered in Committee

Clause 1

PROVISION OF DIGITAL ETC SERVICES BY HMRC: PREPARATORY EXPENDITURE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Eleanor.

The Government have made significant reforms to the business rates system since our wide-ranging review in 2016. Responding to the needs of ratepayers, we are building a system fit for the 21st century. The tax system must keep pace with the way business operates today, and that means a modern, online system that makes it easier for businesses to manage their bills in one place.

Today’s measure is a small step towards that modern system for business rates. It will give Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs the ability to carry out the early design work so that it can explore how a new system can be delivered. It does not implement or commit us to a particular approach, and the Government will work closely with local government and businesses when we come to develop detailed proposals. We need the Bill because HMRC’s statutory functions do not currently extend to the administration of business rates. As I have said, further primary legislation will be needed for HMRC to implement the outcomes of this work, so this House will have a further opportunity to look again at the project.

On the detail of the Bill’s clauses, HMRC’s functions are set out in primary legislation in the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005. These functions include the collection and management of revenue, as set out in section 5 of the Act, and do not extend to the administration or payment of non-domestic rates. Clause 1 therefore provides HMRC with the ability to incur expenditure in connection with digital services to be provided by it for the purpose of facilitating the administration or payment of non-domestic rates in England. Subsections (2) and (3) define digital services and non-domestic rates respectively. Clause 2 sets out that the amendment will extend to England and Wales but apply only to England.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Eleanor.

When we debated the Bill’s Second Reading last week, we were careful not to stray too far from what is a very narrow Bill. The benefit to the Minister was that he was able to fill a speech by reading out the Bill. I shall not speak just for the sake of it; I shall cut straight to the chase.

I accept completely that this is enabling legislation to allow Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to develop the framework and the product offer, but there are still many outstanding questions that the Government need...
to answer at this stage, because they are fundamental to the approach that is being taken. For instance, will local councils retain their primary role as billing authorities? Who will underwrite the non-collection losses for businesses that opt to use the new digital system? How frequent will HMRC’s payments to local authorities be?

To what extent will local government be involved in the co-design of the system? As was pointed out on Second Reading, there is a great deal of expertise in our councils when it comes to designing systems and processes and bridging systems across different software products, and I think we can tap into that expertise to ensure that the system is fit for purpose. I am sure that the Minister does not want his CV to bear the legacy of an inadequate IT system, a fate that has befallen many Ministers who have gone before him in various Departments.

We want those fundamental questions to be answered, ideally before work starts and money is spent—and that brings me to my next point: we still do not know how much money will be spent. Oddly, a money motion was tabled but did not proceed to a Division, and there was no explanation even of the ballpark figure: not even a rough estimate of how much the new system might cost. The cost must be weighed against the benefits to HMRC and businesses, and it must be established whether we are getting value for money for the investment.

I must be careful not to stray too far from the subject of the debate, but the Bill does not address the underlying chronic underfunding of local public services. The Minister really must deal with the issue of the £8 billion funding gap, to which we have referred very often in the House.

We do not intend to divide the Committee, but if the Minister is not able to answer those questions today, it would be useful if, at the very least, Ministers could respond in writing.

Rishi Sunak: Let me deal briefly with the hon. Gentleman’s points. He asked some specific questions about the design of the system. As we established on Second Reading, I cannot give him the answers, not because I am trying to hide something but simply because I do not know them at this stage, and nor does anyone else. The Bill will enable HMRC to start its scoping work, and the questions that the hon. Gentleman rightly posed about the design, who will do what, and how intensive the work will be—or, indeed, how light-touch it might be—will be answered during subsequent analyses. Further primary legislation is likely to be required, so the House will have an opportunity to debate those changes.

On Second Reading, the hon. Gentleman raised an interesting point about the potential integration of the new challenge and appeal system with whatever new platform is designed. That point is worthy of consideration. Again, however, at this stage no one knows how much that would cost, how long it would take, or whether it would be a worthwhile addition to the plan of work. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me: I am not being evasive, but we are beginning a process that will answer all those questions and others.

Similarly, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a specific figure in relation to the budget, because we do not know what the overall system will look like. What I can say is that HMRC’s initial scoping work will be done within its existing resources and budgets, will not, in general, involve the use of consultants, and will hopefully lead to a proposal which, during the spending review, HMRC can decide whether to adopt, depending on the outcome of the review.

Of course local government and, indeed, business should be extensively engaged in the process. I know that HMRC is committed to that, and the hon. Gentleman would no doubt hold me and Treasury Ministers to account if we were not the case. Typically, Select Committees would take evidence from HMRC in hearings as the system was being designed and rolled out over subsequent years, and I have no reason to doubt that that would happen in this instance.

The last question the hon. Gentleman posed was specifically about the frequency of payments. I am pleased to be able to tell him that this was also brought up on Second Reading. Currently, businesses tend to have at least the opportunity to spread their business rates payment over 10 different instalments over the year. That right is prescribed in regulation—the Non-Domestic Rating (Collection and Enforcement) (Local Lists) Regulations 1989—so that flexibility is already in place and is taken up by many businesses. If there was to be any change to that, it would require this place to pass new regulations, so I think the hon. Gentleman can rest assured on that point.

I hope that answers all the hon. Gentleman’s questions, and I ask Members to agree that, if we can take clauses 1 and 2 together, they stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): In answer to the Minister’s implied question, I have not put clause 2 to the Committee yet, and therefore before I put the questions on clauses 1 and 2 I will immediately, for the sake of clarity, rule that we are debating clause 1 and clause 2 together; I had not said that before, but as both the Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman appear to have done so I will retrospectively allow it. Also, I will just ensure that no one else wishes to speak on either clause 1 or clause 2 before I put either of the Questions, and I see that is indeed the case, so let us proceed.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading
of this new digital system. I am grateful to the Clerks of the House and to officials in both my Department and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for their work on the Bill.

This simple Bill will allow HMRC to develop a new system for the administration of business rates; it has wide support, and I commend it to the House.

4.58 pm

Jim McMahon: I do not intend to talk at length, but I do wish to say that when people look at Parliament and the division that Brexit causes, they believe that our politics is in crisis. Although I know that the topic the Bill addresses is not interesting for many people and I doubt that many people will be watching, it has demonstrated that we can work across parties, and indeed that is how Parliament generally works, although it is not often seen. I accept that this is a technical matter and is not as controversial as Brexit, which I will leave for others. I thank the Minister for reaching out very early in this process, and I wish the Bill success in the other place.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

Medical Cannabis under Prescription

4.59 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House reaffirms its welcome for the change in the law that allows access to medical cannabis under prescription, but notes that only a handful of prescriptions for whole-plant-extract medical cannabis have been issued on the NHS, which has left a significant number of patients, many of whom are children with intractable epilepsy, with no access to medical cannabis and experiencing severe distress; and calls on the Government immediately to act to ensure that medical cannabis is available to appropriate patients and in particular to children suffering severe intractable epilepsy, such as Alfie Dingley whose plight and campaign did so much to secure the change in the law.

It is a real privilege to stand here and represent families from across the country, alongside colleagues from across the House who I am sure will scamper into the Chamber in all haste when they realise how fast the previous business has been dealt with. This gives us a suitable amount of time—some five hours—in which to debate this really serious matter.

On 8 April, Mr Speaker granted me, with support from other colleagues across the House, an urgent question on the medical use of cannabis. This followed the removal of a young lady’s medical cannabis from her family’s possession as they came through customs at Southend airport in Essex. The young lady’s name was Teagan, and her family are ardent campaigners on this issue. They know, because they have been abroad to get medical cannabis oil for Teagan, that it has a really helpful effect on her. What had an even more dramatic effect on Teagan’s family was that, perhaps not unexpectedly, Border Force confiscated the oil. I do not blame Border Force or the Home Office—we will go into the history of how we got to this position in a moment—who were doing their jobs. However, after long conversations on the phone that evening and conversations with the Speaker, I was really pleased to be granted the urgent question.

The urgent question meant that the House could come together to ask why an oil that had been prescribed—admittedly it was prescribed abroad; nevertheless it was prescribed—should be taken from a young lady who desperately needed it because of the seizures that she suffered as a result of her epileptic condition.

The oil was taken away, and the family were promised, quite rightly, that it would be kept in a safe place and not damaged.

On the Saturday a week after the urgent question, the prescription was eventually accepted by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office. I say “eventually” because there is such confusion surrounding this prescribed medical product. It is fascinating to me and even to those within the medical profession.

The first prescription was rejected, and Teagan was not allowed to have the oil back because the prescription did not mention the word “oil”. Even though the description of the product was completely accurate, it was rejected because it did not contain the word “oil”. A new prescription was issued that included the word “oil”, and the oil was released. Believe it or not, conversations then took place about who was going to pay for the transportation of that medical oil to Teagan.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on the work they have done on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on medical cannabis under prescription, and on behalf of my constituent Bailey Williams and his family. His mother has written to me about today’s debate, which unfortunately she cannot attend, to say that Bailey really needs urgent access to medical cannabis because of the continuing effect that his constant seizure activity is having on him. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel as frustrated as I do that, many months after the Government first indicated that this medicine could be prescribed, he is still having to speak about it today and I am once again having to raise Bailey’s case on the Floor of the House?

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That is what we are here for. Yes, we are frustrated and angry, but actually we are here to do something very important. The only reason the Home Office deregulated this drug and we are in this position today is that this House came together and, more importantly, because the families came together. Those families have young children—I am a father myself, like lots of colleagues in the House—and we all came together to say that the situation was fundamentally wrong. We asked why medical cannabis was illegal if we knew that it helped our children.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Am I right in my assessment that Ministers have bent over backwards and we have acted in the Chamber to ensure that these products are now available, but that the problem is in the medical profession? What more can we do now? I know that this is interfering in the medical profession, but, frankly, that is now becoming necessary.

Sir Mike Penning: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care stood at the Dispatch Box during the urgent question and laid out in plain English that it is not illegal for a suitably qualified person to prescribe these medical products, so how are we still here?

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): May I interrupt the right hon. Gentleman?

Sir Mike Penning: I will give way in a second.

Frank Field: It relates to that very point.

Sir Mike Penning: I will give way.

Frank Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much. When we heard the Home Secretary speak about this initiative, we all thought that those whose children’s lives were being ruined by fits would from now on find solace. That was not the case for those whose children were beyond help at that stage, but we thought that it would apply in the future. Given that we want it, given that the Home Secretary wants it, given that the parents want it, and given that individual doctors want to prescribe it, some group at a regional level in the Department of Health and Social Care is clearly preventing prescriptions from being issued in a way in which they can be delivered.

Sir Mike Penning: I will touch on many of the right hon. Gentleman’s points later in my speech. The Home Secretary was ever so helpful, as was the Health Secretary, but the Prime Minister played an absolutely diamond role, and we took Alfie Dingley and Hannah Deacon to No. 10 with the petition. I know that we are not supposed to refer to the Gallery, but they are up there watching us, and they were scuttling up the stairs very quickly.

It is vital that we have a proper debate over the next five hours, without worries about time limits. I am not fussed about whether the Government lose their business later.

Frank Field: There is no business tomorrow.

Sir Mike Penning: There is Government business later on, but I do not care about that. We need to try and flush out and identify the blockages, which is what the Health Secretary tried to do.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Mike Penning: I will, but I will then try to make some progress.

Norman Lamb: In response to another intervention, the right hon. Gentleman indicated that there is a degree of resistance within the NHS and among clinicians, but does he agree that this is about more than that? This is also about the Government’s regulatory framework, which is restricting access to this medication. Many people in acute pain are resorting to opioids, which are highly addictive and potentially fatal, while being unable legally to access cannabis, which can often ease their pain.

Sir Mike Penning: The right hon. Gentleman and I often debate health issues. We were both shadow Health Ministers at the same time, and we agree on most things, including on the prescribed medical use of cannabis. The other area to which he was alluding is not for this debate. It is not referred to in the motion. The reason we have managed to get such huge cross-party support and support from families around the country is that we have stuck to the specific issue of prescribed medical use without going into casual use.

Norman Lamb rose—

Sir Mike Penning: If I can, I will make a bit of progress, because there is plenty of time for colleagues. I am really chuffed that the Backbench Business Committee gave us this opportunity. When has the Backbench Business Committee ever had five hours for a debate on a Monday afternoon? I am simply thrilled, and I intend to use as much of that time as possible. I got a little note from the Clerks saying, “You should speak for 12 to 15 minutes, Mr Penning”—yeah, in your dreams. [Laughter.]

There is a blockage in the NHS if someone cannot pay for the prescription. There are consultants both within the NHS and outside, but if someone can pay for it in the private sector, private prescriptions are being honoured. The product is available in this country, perfectly legally, to those who can afford it, and that sticks strongly in my throat.
[Sir Mike Penning]

At the conclusion of the urgent question, although it is not in Hansard, I clearly heard Mr Speaker tell the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that, whatever happens, we will not leave it—he was referring to me. We will go on and on about this until we get justice for these young people.

Looking beyond the small cohort of desperately ill children, there are others in the country who would clearly benefit from medical cannabis. I am not a doctor, but hundreds and hundreds of families have come to ask me whether this means they can get some help. The MS Society has sent an excellent briefing to colleagues today, and the Brain Tumour Charity and many others have also provided briefings.

Constituents come to my surgery, and I tell them that we need to make sure that their specialists, the experts in their area, are saying that they need medicinal cannabis, and then we can fight their corner. We have such specialists in the sector now who are saying that children and young people with epilepsy—my constituent has just turned 18, so their mum will want me to talk about post-18, too—get a tangible benefit from treating their seizures with these prescriptions, prescribed by a suitable specialist.

We know exactly what are in those pharmaceuticals, yet we still have a crazy situation in which hospitals are telling parents that if they bring these products on to a ward when their child is ill, as part of their ongoing medication, social services will be called to look into what they are doing with their family—for a product prescribed by a consultant.

My constituent has just turned 18. When I wrote on behalf of the family to her GP and the clinical commissioning group, which was blocking the prescription, they said, “We are not interested in homeopathic products.” What on earth is going on inside the medical profession in this country? If they do not know what it is, they should go and ask someone before they write stupid letters back to people and break their hearts. I had to send the letter on.

We should look carefully at what we can do to help. It is not for any politician in this House who is not suitably qualified to say to anybody that they deserve to have this product. What we must do is break down the blockages—that is what the Secretary of State alluded to in his answer to the UQ—and find out the reason for them.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I share a passion for this subject. Does he agree that the absurdity lying at the heart of it is that heroin is legally prescribed as morphine, which has been well understood for many years, but that a medical prejudice kicks in when using cannabis for medical purposes? Does that not highlight that there is an inconsistency that needs to be addressed—and addressed quickly?

Sir Mike Penning: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have been referring to Teagan, and he is her MP. As he knows, she got her medication seven days late, and I am convinced that she would not have got it if we had not secured the urgent question, which is why such debates are important.

I used to be a Minister, and I always panicked about UQs. I always asked, “Why don’t we just do a statement? It is a damn sight easier, and we can control the agenda going forward.” The business managers did not always agree with me on that point.

I might be wrong, but as far as I am aware from our investigations the only NHS prescription that has been issued was through the Home Office. Alfie Dingley got his medication through the panel the Home Secretary set up with the expert group in the Home Office. As far as I am aware, since we changed the law in November no NHS prescription has been honoured. We have had trusts clearly threatening consultants not to do this and we have had their professional bodies do the same—I have seen some of the correspondence. As I alluded to earlier, families have been threatened with social services for bringing the product into the hospital where their child was being treated, even though this was a prescribed drug that is perfectly legal in this country today.

The real issue is: why can only those who have the money, those who have a donor and those who have crowdfunded, or, as in the case of my constituents, those to whom one of the manufacturers has given it for free—there is no way in the world they could afford this, and I thank the manufacturer for doing that, particularly for the family—get this? In the country that is so proud of the NHS, how on earth have we got into a situation where those who are poor do not get it?

Norman Lamb: I agree with the points the right hon. Gentleman is making, but the fact that the one prescription that has been issued has been through the Home Office raises an important point: the Home Office should have nothing to do with a health issue and this should be transferred, without delay, by the Government to the Department of Health and Social Care?

Sir Mike Penning: To be fair, it has been, and that was before we changed the law in November. The Home Office set up a panel while we looked at the changes of the law. This does not really matter, but a Health Minister is at the Dispatch Box today and a Health Secretary was there for the urgent question, so this is clearly sitting in that Department, but the connotations are still there in respect of, for instance, bringing this into the country—

Norman Lamb: And licensing?

Sir Mike Penning: I understand that point, but this drug has been moved out of its category into the Department of Health and Social Care and it can be prescribed. The issue is not prescription. Even though there were a limited amount of private prescriptions, they are being issued. I thank the consultants who have met me and my colleagues from across the House who have been campaigning on this. They are willing to do this. As far as I can work out, the blockage is that this was moved too fast to help the families whom we wanted to help; the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office were not ready.

That fascinates me, because four and a half years ago— it is that long since I have been a Minister—I stood in Westminster Hall as the Minister responsible for drug policy and said then that the Government were minded to allow the medical use of cannabis under prescription.
Do they not read our debates? Do they not listen to what Ministers have to say? I do not know whether they thought I was having a flier and as a Minister of State was just doing this because I felt like it on that day. But the then Home Secretary is now the Prime Minister, and of course I did it with her permission.

Norman Lamb: What did Ministers do after the right hon. Gentleman made that point in Westminster Hall? He says that that was four years ago. Why did it take until last year for the Government to do anything?

Sir Mike Penning: You should have seen the reaction of some of my civil servants when I got back to the Department after making that comment in Westminster Hall! You would understand then why this went exactly nowhere, even though I pushed and cajoled. Sadly, or fortunately, I was moved to the Ministry of Defence after the 2017 election.

So why are we here today? Why have colleagues come into the Chamber, which was completely empty 10 or 15 minutes ago, when they could probably go, as I do not think there is going to be a vote? I say that because the Government have indicated to me that they have accepted the motion, which is voteable, if we needed to do that. I have indicated to the Whips that if we needed to do this, I would push it to a vote. I do not think we need to, simply because, after listening to the debate, the Minister will realise, “Hey, we’ve got to move faster.”

Are we moving fast? No. Are we moving faster than we were? Yes, but more needs to be done. Why is that? Because young people are having massive seizures that are affecting their lives and those of their loved ones. They are affecting their families and their quality of life in this country today.

We can do something about that. We are on the journey of doing more about it, but I ask more as a father than as a politician: why do they have to find the money and go to Holland or to Canada? If they cannot find the money, they are not going to get it, unless someone donates it to them or they crowdfund. In the 21st century, why are we allowing these children to be given drugs that are not working and that were never designed for the use for which they are being given, while we have products out there that the pharmaceutical companies are producing, and we know exactly what is in them? It may not help—it may not stop those seizures—but for some people it clearly does. It is morally wrong for us to sit back and allow those children to suffer, and I have no intention of doing that.

Frank Field: On the unsatisfactory position that the right hon. Gentleman has described, with desperate families going to Holland to buy these drugs, could the Home Secretary not say today that he has instructed Border Force not to prevent anybody from bringing the drugs back into this country?

Sir Mike Penning: I forgot to do so earlier, so I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman. We both asked some questions in the House prior to the Home Secretary’s changing his decision, and the right hon. Gentleman kind of goaded me into some of the things that I wanted to do. The right hon. Gentleman and colleagues might remember that an important debate on Europe was due to take place on the Wednesday, when Alfie Dingley and his family were going to Holland, and on the Monday I said that the right hon. Gentleman and I would go to Holland with Alfie Dingley and bring it back, and if we were arrested, so be it. I think the Government might have lost that vote on the Wednesday had we not changed the law in time. I do not think that matters; what matters is that Alfie got his medication.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s specific point, the answer is yes, if it has been brought back with a prescription. We are still in Europe and, as I understand it, European prescriptions are as good as ours—I am told they are, but who knows?—and if they have been over and brought it back with the prescription, it is seriously wrong to take that product off a young child.

5.23 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Forgive me for shuffling my papers, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was not expecting to be called quite so early in the debate. I am grateful to have been called early, but the House will have to bear with me. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing the debate, on their brilliant campaigning on this issue and on their co-chairpersonship of the all-party group on medical cannabis. I also congratulate the campaigners—some of whom are present—who have brought this issue into the public eye over the past year and are determined to make sure that it remains there.

Kevin Brennan: Like my hon. Friend, I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) might have been called next, as the co-chair of the all-party group—I think that is probably what was in his mind—and I was going to intervene on her to correct my earlier intervention, because I see that my constituents Rachel and Craig, who are Bailey Williams’s parents, have managed to attend today’s debate, despite the fact that they thought they would not be able to because of a medical appointment for Bailey. This gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to them for their relentless campaigning on his behalf. It is because of people like them that we are all here this evening.

Jeff Smith: I am delighted to have given way to my hon. Friend to allow him to pay that tribute to our visitors today.

I have received two letters from a constituent of mine, who has asked me to keep his name confidential. I am happy to give it to the Minister on a confidential basis. My constituent first wrote to me on this issue last September, after the Government accepted the principle that we should be able to prescribe medical cannabis, because the aim had not been fulfilled. He wrote:

“I have a grandson who suffers from a severe form of Crohn’s disease. He is in constant pain and finds that his present regime of opiate-based pain killing has difficult side effects. He tells me that his consultant doctor is willing to prescribe the cannabis-based alternative as soon as it is permitted. My grandson has never obtained cannabis illegally and does not intend to do so.”

My constituent wrote again to me in April. Things had moved on, but this probably illustrates the problem. In the second letter, he wrote:

“The position in my family is now relatively fortunate. Left in limbo for a long time by the NHS, and enduring frequent nausea and serious debility, my grandson used his own initiative. He found a private doctor specialising in pain control, a highly respectable man, formerly an NHS consultant, who gave him a prescription for a cannabis product. This has been successful. His symptoms
[Jeff Smith]

are under control, his general health and capacity to eat are much improved, and he is being phased back into his job, which he had been likely to lose. I am meeting the financial cost to the tune of £695 per month currently. By tightening my belt I can do it, at least for a reasonable time to come. I never spent money to better effect in my life, and I am so grateful for medical science. But some of the sufferers on the TV programme have no financial resources. And for an old Socialist like me it goes against the grain to use private medicine.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, you do not need to be an old socialist to think that this is an unacceptable situation.

Sir Mike Penning: I don’t think I’m an old socialist.

Jeff Smith: The right hon. Gentleman, who set out the case very well, is certainly not an old socialist. As we heard from him, there are multiple examples of patients who want to access medical cannabis, and whose doctors want them to access it, but are not able to do so. These are patients who last year were given hope that their pain, anxiety and seizures would end, only to have their hopes dashed and frustrated.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Like many hon. Members, I have had parents contact me recently who are desperate to obtain treatment for their children. They have said to me that, if anything, the situation has got worse since the guidelines were issued and they completely fail to understand how that can be. Is that my hon. Friend’s experience? Can we convey to the Minister today that there is a powerful sense that hope was raised and has been dashed?

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend makes a key point. Those hopes were raised. People were promised medicine but that promise has not been delivered upon. It is a source of great frustration.

Frank Field: I cannot quite understand how the mechanics work. If a patient gets a private prescription and they remain in this country, they get the drug, but if a patient gets a national health service prescription, it does not work. How can we have such a system? A person can go to a private doctor and to a chemist, who will provide NHS drugs but will also do a private prescription. Who is preventing them from giving the same prescription to somebody who cannot afford to pay, such as this great socialist who is paying money for his grandchild?

Jeff Smith: I am about to come to that point, which is the key question. The root of the problem is that we are not talking about an illegal prescription; these are legal prescriptions, but our NHS is unwilling or unable to make them and deliver on them. The question we need to ask today is, what can Ministers and the Government do to help to sort out the situation? What can we do? It is clearly not good enough for us to say, “Well, Parliament has legislated so we’ve done our bit. It’s now all down to the medical establishment.” The system clearly is not working.

At the root of the issue is evidence. The Government have issued a call for research on this, which is fine as far as it goes, but we need to look creatively at that because research and evidence take different forms. After writing to the Department, I received a letter from a Minister saying that cannabis is legal to be prescribed, but should only be prescribed where there is “clear published evidence of benefit”.

That little phrase is difficult. Cannabis has been listed under schedule 1 until very recently. When a drug is in schedule 1, it is incredibly difficult to do research on it.

Frank Field: We would cut our drugs bill in half if we applied that to all medicines.

Jeff Smith: My right hon. Friend makes a good point.

The Minister’s letter said that cannabis should only be prescribed where there is “clear published evidence of benefit...and need...and where established treatment options have been exhausted”.

My question to the Minister is, do we really think all those hurdles are correct? If cannabis is the best treatment for a condition, we should not have to exhaust all those other options; we should be able to trust our clinicians to prescribe in such circumstances.

The root of the problem is clinicians’ lack of confidence to prescribe. The biggest barrier is concerns over the evidence. The Government have issued a call for evidence and research, but they are insisting on randomised controlled trials, which bothers me greatly. I am really concerned about the insistence on evidence from randomised controlled trials, to the exclusion of other ways of gathering evidence. I strongly advise Ministers and others to go back and look at some of the evidence recently given to the Health and Social Care Committee by Professor Mike Barnes, who is a noted expert on this subject. He has produced a study on the evidence for the efficacy of cannabis for a variety of medical uses.

There is plenty of evidence around the world for the efficacy of cannabis for medical use. However, we are not accepting that evidence because it has not been produced in randomised controlled trials.

In his evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee, Professor Barnes said that we are trying to force cannabis into a particular pharmaceutical route with regards to trials, when that is not an appropriate way to go. He said,

“cannabis is not just cannabis...Cannabis is a whole family of plants”

and

“it does not lend itself very well to the standard pharmaceutical approach. It is not a single molecule that we can compare against a placebo. There are over 2,500 varieties of cannabis, each with a different structure...each with subtle differences.

He told the Committee that each variety interacts with the others differently. So which one of those varieties do we pick for our randomised controlled trial for a standard pharma model?

Professor Barnes said that we need to take a range of other evidence into account, including anecdotal evidence. When there are tens of thousands of anecdotes that build an evidence base, there is substantial anecdotal evidence for the efficacy of cannabis for medical approaches around the world.”

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): First, is it not also the case that we are talking not just about therapeutic uses, but about pain control? There are many conditions where pain control is actually the most important use of a medication. Secondly, may I add my recognition of the work done on this issue by the former Member for Newport West?
Jeff Smith: Yes, what is the phrase about standing on the shoulders of giants? I think that we all admire the work on this issue carried out by Paul Flynn over many years. I do not understand why the Government will not, at the same time as calling for randomised controlled trials, also look at observational trials, whereby people can actually take the medicine they need and we can see how effective it is. We need an audit of those already using the medicine to see what is happening to them. There is nothing wrong with randomised controlled trials, but the complexity of cannabis as a product makes them very difficult to carry out. We can have them, but there are lots of other ways in which we can gather evidence that will enable us to move forward.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that we have been flexible on trials with other diseases and drugs? I think particularly of the flexibility on HIV after campaigners fought to get the drugs to people who were terminal before trials had finished because there was an understanding that the harm of the disease was far greater than any side effects could possibly be. That is how we should be treating this issue as well. We understand that the risk is relatively low, although there might be some, but the potential gain is rather great.

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Yes, there may be risks, but we should look at the risks of some of the other treatments that people are using. Opiate treatments are much more risky than cannabis.

We need to find another way forward. We need to take into account the different types of evidence. We need, really, a bespoke medical response to this. I ask the Minister, how can we use the different types of evidence to get an evidence base that will satisfy Government and satisfy clinicians? How can we use, for example, the Access to Medical Treatments (Innovation) Act 2016? We also need a bespoke regulatory response. The question for the Minister is, why not? Other countries have done this, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Canada. They all treat cannabis differently from other products and other treatments. Holland has set up an office for medical cannabis to deal with the complexity of the issue and I do not see why we cannot do something similar.

Kevin Brennan: To follow up on the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), in many of these instances, as with my constituents, we are talking about children who are suffering multiple seizures that are impacting on their mobility, weight and muscle tone through muscle wasting and this is putting their lives at risk. Is it not therefore quite strange that the balance of risk does not seem to be taken into account when considering prescribing this treatment?

Jeff Smith: That is absolutely right. There is almost an irrational fear about the risk of cannabis compared with the risk of some of what we might call more conventional treatments that people are already using.

Frank Field: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again; I am not going to speak in the debate. Is it not true that in all the evidence that has been sent to us by parents, no one has written to say, “I’ve used the drug and it’s made me worse”? All the evidence shows that it either has no effect or leads to a radical improvement.

Jeff Smith: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is absolutely right. I am not aware of any evidence of the product making a condition worse. People have been using cannabis for thousands of years. If these worries about side effects were really justified, I think we would probably have seen them by now.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman has touched on a very important point. Because we are talking about pharmaceutical prescription drugs, the risk has been relatively alleviated. There is evidence of people using cannabis in a casual way that does have an adverse neurological effect. That is why this whole debate and campaign had to be separated from that so that it is about prescribed use. There is a separate debate to do with casual use. He is absolutely right—people have used it for thousands of years. Some people think that is correct and other people do not. For me, it is about knowing exactly what is in the product that is being given to the patient.

Jeff Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That points to the issue about where we get the product from. The problems, allegedly linked to increased episodes of psychosis, are from high-THC street cannabis, which is not what we mean when we talk about medical cannabis products. As I said, there are lots of different types of cannabis products. They are very often CBD-based, but when they contain THC—the psychoactive element—it is a much, much smaller amount than in street cannabis. It is like comparing apples and pears. He makes a really important point.

We need to look at how we can learn from evidence in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Canada, as well as countries that have successfully introduced medical cannabis regimes, such as Australia and Denmark. What work are the Government doing to learn from the experience of those jurisdictions? There are currently at least 138 medical cannabis trials worldwide. We need to take into account that global evidence.

I would like to ask the Minister a number of questions. Why can clinicians make individual decisions on certain conditions but not others? For example, clinicians can make individual decisions on a case-by-case basis on Crohn’s disease, which my constituent’s grandson suffers from, but not on some other conditions.

We need a scoping exercise to look at how we can enable patients to get this medicine now. There are estimated to be something like 3 million cannabis users in the UK, with around 1 million of those using it for medical purposes. Those figures may be high but, whichever figures we look at, there are hundreds of thousands of people using cannabis to alleviate pain or help with a medical condition. At the moment, they get their product from the street—from the illegal trade. That is not good for them or for society. That is the key point. People are already using cannabis for medical reasons and getting it from illegal suppliers.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is making an excellent speech. On that point, I had a visit to my constituency surgery from one of our veterans, who had incurred an injury during his service. He was in chronic pain and felt that cannabis alleviated that, but he did not wish to buy it; he wished
it to be prescribed and for Ministers to look at the research and studies, to ensure that veterans who need that assistance can have it.

**Jeff Smith:** That is not an unusual case. There are lots of people who want to use medical cannabis and do not want to buy it from the street or go to Holland to import cannabis products, and they are frustrated.

I will wind up, because I have been speaking for longer than I intended. On the funding issue, there are cases of clinicians being willing to prescribe but being blocked by trusts or CCGs. What is the Minister’s understanding of how many cases there are where funding is the issue, rather than prescription? Even where clinicians are willing to prescribe and there is new thinking, CCGs do not have budget lines for some of these products, so the reluctance is understandable. I am interested to know whether the Minister has any information on that.

It might cost more for the NHS to supply more medical cannabis prescriptions, but we have to compare that with the reduction in other costs. The estimate is that opioid costs would be 25% lower, and there would be fewer hospital admissions. Professor Mike Barnes said in his evidence to the Select Committee that we could probably introduce medical cannabis in this country on the NHS at no net cost, when we take into account the reduced costs elsewhere.

Our system is clearly too restrictive. It is not working. We need creative thinking and flexibility from the Government, and we need them to look at the different types of evidence from around the world. There are people in this country who, if they were living in Holland, Australia or Canada, would be able to get on with their lives, get their cannabis products legally and not have the worries of the campaigners in our Gallery today about them or their children and relatives having to go through chronic pain or the episodes of epilepsy that we have seen in young patients over the last year.

We all want to make some progress and are desperately frustrated that we are not able to get anywhere. I refer the Minister to the evidence given by Professor Mike Barnes. We need to look at other types of evidence to inform ourselves of a way to deliver the products that our patients need into their hands.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** The hon. Gentleman made reference to the role of the Minister for Health. Is he aware that the Minister for Health has had the responsibility since 2011?

**Jeff Smith:** I am aware of that, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am also aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on setting up the all-party group on medical cannabis under prescription, and him and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on their leadership on this issue.

The first urgent question on this issue was asked about Alfie Dingley by me, and my right hon. Friend, who was sitting behind me at the time I asked it, indicated his support on this issue, and he thought he had begun to open up this issue in the Home Office. However, we had the absurdity that that urgent question was answered by the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service. He had been handed the responsibility at 24 hours’ notice from the Drugs Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), not because she had any particular interest in drugs from a health perspective—obviously, the Home Office’s responsibilities include protecting the public—but because her husband is associated with British Sugar. It supplies the cannabis for a great potential British success story in the form of GW Pharmaceuticals, which is one of the global leaders in producing medicinal cannabis—just not for the British people. That is something we need to change.

I want to put this issue in its global perspective and its historical perspective. Unless we understand why there is a such a lack of understanding about this issue, and why we are so behind in the research on medical cannabis and why the medical profession is so intimidated by it, I do not think we will get the necessary pressure from the Minister and her colleagues to continue to push for the necessary advance in this area.

The reason we are so far behind lies in racist American policing of the 1950s: frankly, because African-Americans smoked this stuff, it was seen as ghastly and very dangerous. Therefore, in total disregard of the scientific evidence, cannabis was listed in schedule 1 to the UN convention, which has made it extremely difficult to research its medicinal benefits. The irony is that we have had medicines derived from opiates for an extremely...
long time—they are standard medical products—yet medicines derived from cannabis were put beyond the bounds of research.

GW Pharmaceuticals owes its leadership in this area to a licence issued by Lord Boateng, when he was the Minister responsible for drugs policy in the late 1990s, that allowed it in exceptional circumstances to conduct research into medical cannabis. That decision was followed by £1 billion of investment in GW Pharmaceuticals. I want the Minister to understand that it is not only GW Pharmaceuticals but a number of billion-dollar companies in North America, particularly in Canada but also in the United States, that are now investing in this area. There is a tidal wave of investor money coming into the medical cannabis business and, to an extent, the recreational cannabis business—obviously we must focus on the former. We need to ask ourselves why so many people are choosing to invest so much money in the potential of this product.

When the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington and I became co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for drug policy reform, our third co-chair Baroness Meacher—I pay tribute to the work that she has done and I became co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for Health and Care Excellence guidelines will focus on convention.

The Minister will know that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines will focus on four indications: chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, treatment-resistant epilepsy, and nausea and vomiting due to chemotherapy. However, there is substantial evidence—enough to excite investors around the world to invest billions of dollars in the potential of this medicine—that cannabis or cannabinoids will be effective in improving chronic pain in adults, chemotherapy-induced nausea, short-term sleep outcomes in individuals with deep sleep disturbance, clinician-measured spasticity symptoms associated with MS, symptoms of Tourette’s syndrome, anxiety symptoms in individuals with social anxiety disorders and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I hope that the Minister will understand that, if we can advance the science satisfactorily in relation to anxiety and depression, this is of potentially vast application.

We have to understand the range of interests arrayed against the development of medicines in this area. We should consider how policy has been developed in both North America and Germany, and indeed here, because the development has come not from the medical profession or the pharmaceutical industry but from outside. In the United States, those states that have approved the use of medical cannabis usually started the process through a referendum that then imposed the answer on the state’s legislature. Twelve of the 25 states that have medical cannabis have now moved on and established a market for cannabis for recreational adult use. An important development is that Canada, which has had medical cannabis for some time, last year introduced a market for legally supplied cannabis for recreational adult use.

I quite understand the political need, reflected in the establishment of the all-party parliamentary group on medical cannabis under prescription by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and the hon. Member for Gower, to differentiate between medicinal and recreational adult use. We must of course focus on the medicine first. There is a separate discussion to be had about the important criminal justice, societal and public health benefits that would come from being able to protect the public and children by having a legally supplied and properly regulated and licensed market. What has been absent from the wider political debate about this to date is a proper consideration of evidence. We are 50 years behind on the potential benefit to the public because we have been unable to get the evidence, and that is a result of the policy imposed through the 1961 convention.

I want to draw attention to one potential application relating to chronic pain. The United States is now coping with an opioid epidemic. Last year, 63,000 Americans died of an opiate overdose that started in the doctor’s surgery. These were not junkies on the streets; they were people who went to their doctor to get treated for chronic pain. Many of them were prescribed OxyContin courtesy of Purdue Pharma, in circumstances that are now subject to a class action. When the state of Arizona held a referendum on legalising cannabis, the result was on a knife edge and it was not clear which side would win. I am advised that right at the end of the campaign a substantial slug of money was put in to achieve a no vote. Nobody knew at the time where the money had come from, but my understanding is that it actually came from a business associated with the rehabilitation of opiate addicts, which is truly shocking. To prevent cannabis-based medicines having an opportunity to replace the much more dangerous opiate-based medicines, which have contributed to this terrible level of dependency on a medicine that is profoundly dangerous if taken incorrectly, cannabis had to be kept out of the business.

What I want to say to the Minister is that I am anxious for the Department of Health and Social Care, in taking this issue forward, to clearly understand where all the interests are here, and, if one begins to roll this forward in the years to come with regard to the potential application, to understand what opportunities there are for the United Kingdom as a provider of medicine from cannabis. GW Pharma ought to be reinforced by other companies supplying pharmaceutical grade cannabis-derived medicinal products to people. If the conditions I listed earlier are anything to go by, this will be a multibillion-dollar-industry, particularly if we can get a decent slug of the global market.

This is not just about the economic effect, however. This is about the opportunity costs of people continuing to be prescribed opiates when they could be prescribed a cannabis-based medicine. It is about the opportunity costs of people self-medicating with alcohol to deal with the aches and pains of old age, rather than understanding.
the benefits they could get from cannabis. We are now at
the stage—the Minister will have seen the report about
people who have a medical condition for which they
have a diagnosis who now cannot get medical cannabis—
where people are now growing their own. In certain
circumstances, they are being arrested for growing their
own medicine. Our policy is in a mess. It will need real
drive from Ministers to get a grip of all the regulators
and the medical, pharmaceutical and patient interests
to keep pushing for sensible reform.

I ask the Minister and her team to look around the
world at the jurisdictions leading on this issue. Look at
what is happening in North America, particularly Canada
and New York state, and in Germany. Germany has
moved pretty rapidly following a legal action by two
cannabis growers producing their own medicine. The
German state lost that legal action and it now enables
to grow their own cannabis for medicine, saying
that what these people need is pharmaceutical grade
medicine from cannabis. Two years on, I think 80,000
prescriptions have been written in Germany for people
to get medicine from cannabis. We can move relatively
quickly if we have the will.

If we do not have the will, we will see the continuing
misery of families with epileptic children who are chronically
ill. It is quite right that End Our Pain and the all-party
group have focused on those families, led so brilliantly
by the Deacon family, with Alfie, and Charlotte Caldwell,
with her son Billy. They are the ones who have pushed
this over the line. No politician can turn around to
mothers and families in circumstances where they have
obtained treatment with medicine derived from cannabis
and faced up to the cruelty, on their return to the
United Kingdom, of that medicine being taken away
from them. Billy Caldwell’s case was the one that drove
the Home Secretary over the line, issuing a special
licence and beginning the process of reform in this area.

I cannot find anyone in this House who does not
accept the principle that if we can have medicine from
the opium poppy then surely we can have medicine
from a cannabis plant. Find me evidence of someone
who has died of a cannabis overdose. I am told there is
not any. Of course, people have died in certain circumstances
relating to mental conditions associated with very heavy
use, particularly by young people, of the kind of dreadful
stuff sold on our streets by the criminal supply chain.
But we have chosen, by the laws we have passed, to put
that business in the hands of criminals who are selling
the strongest and most dangerous stuff to our children.
Trading Standards is not going around measuring it or
checking that consumers are over the age of 18 when
they purchase it. That is why it is easier for our kids to
get this dangerous form of cannabis than alcohol.

We need to get to grips with an awful lot of reform in
this area, but the public benefit from the United Kingdom
pushing on with the science and supporting research
could be huge. We in this House must remain engaged,
and Ministers must really push and lead on this. My
fellow co-chair of the all-party group on drug policy
reform, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington,
made a very important point. There will have to be a
bespoke arrangement to regulate and license the system.
There is an endocannabinoid system in all animals.

[Mr Jim Cunningham]

That is not taught at medical school. That is not currently
part of standard medical training or assessment, but it
would appear to be a reason why this stuff works at a
common sense level. It is why, among all the people we
represent, there is the knowledge that this stuff does work.
That is why hundreds of thousands of people are using
it to self-medicate for the conditions from which they
suffer. We have to bring those people into the legal
framework, so they can access the medicines that will
make their lives very much easier. Many of the diseases
and conditions likely to be treated by medicinal cannabis
are the diseases of ageing. It would be infinitely better if
people can use a safe medicine such as cannabis, rather
than dangerous medicines such as opiates or legal alcohol.

I ask the Minister to push her colleagues to ensure
that we do not simply follow down a pharmaceutical
path that just assesses medicine as a molecule with a
particular individual effect on a particular individual
condition. That will not work in respect of medicines
derived from cannabis. We have heard the reasons: the
complexity of a plant-based medicine that has many
thousands of different variants once one starts spinning
them out. There should not be a choice between randomised
control trials and observational trials. We need to do
both. The opportunity for the United Kingdom and the
people we represent—both economically in terms of a
highly successful business and in improving public health
and reducing the danger of opiate use and so on—is
there for us to grasp. That is why investors have got it.
They understand the opportunities for innovation and
investment with real money in this area.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister, now that the
policy lead is in her Department and not the Home
Office, to get the rest of the licensing arrangements off
the Home Office and get them into a state where we
advance public health, advance the economic interests
of the United Kingdom and make a huge difference to
public health in the UK, making people safer and
healthier, and, ultimately, providing much greater value
for money than the alternative treatments that people
are using at the moment.

6.8 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour
to follow the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt),
who is so impassioned—that was evident in his speech—and
has done so much work on this issue. I think everyone
would pay tribute to what he has done.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel
Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the
Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing
the debate and on the work they have done, alongside
the End Our Pain campaign, to highlight the importance
and urgency of this issue. It is heartbreaking to hear the
stories of families who are trying to access medical
cannabis, and especially parents whose children are so
poorly. I am sure we all pay tribute to them for their
perseverance in standing up for their children.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I pay
tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead
(Sir Mike Penning). For a long time, he has been
campaigning very strongly on this issue—in fact, we
met some families he brought down to the House of
Commons last year—as, of course, has the hon. Member
for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).
If my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) watched the news over the weekend, she will have seen a family who had to go to Holland and pay over £1,000 to get the medical relief that their kids need through medical cannabis. The question therefore is: why can we not do the same in this country? Why are we being so slow? A lot of kids are suffering, and some could go into a fit and die if we are not very careful. Does she not agree that the Government have to treat this with urgency?

Mary Glindon: I certainly would agree, and that is the case that we are all trying to make today.

I want to highlight the situation for my adult constituent, Lara Smith, who is known for courageously campaigning for the medical use of cannabis by highlighting the problems that she has faced in recent years to access the medicine Bedrocan. Lara is a wife and the mother of three children. She was a paediatric nurse and a county fencing coach before her health deteriorated because of cervical and lumber spondylitis. Over 20 years, she has had 35 different medications as well as a number of operations for her condition. Unfortunately, she has been left with permanent nerve damage, limited mobility and a constant annoying and debilitating tremor in her right hand. Her quality of life has been completely impaired, not just because of her medical condition but particularly because of the drugs that she has been prescribed over the years. This has meant that Lara was not able to be the full-time mother that she wanted to be to her daughters and son.

Fortunately, Lara’s pain management consultant in the north-east prescribed her the drug Bedrocan, and the transformation was such that she was able to come off all her other medications. Her young family said that they felt they had their mum back. The downside is that Lara can access the drug only by travelling to a Dutch pharmacy to collect it. Her arduous journey was brought along pretty quickly. We cannot wait for them then taking it a way. It is too much and too traumatic for one step forward and two steps back, giving hope and financial costs and battle the Government as they take their daughters and son.

I raised this issue in Prime Minister’s questions, and afterwards I received a letter from the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who said that “there should be no barriers to patients getting access to the appropriately prescribed medicine. The Department of Health and Social Care...has been working closely with suppliers and NHS procurement pharmacists to ensure that prescribed CBPM are available when needed.” But that has not been the case for Lara and many other people, as we have heard tonight.

Lara’s private prescription cannot be dispensed by NHS pharmacists. Her consultant has been unsuccessful in obtaining an individual funding request, which Lara is very disappointed about. That was because the hospital trust follows the Royal College of Anaesthetists guidelines, which do not advocate the use of cannabinoids, citing a lack of evidence for effective pain relief, so all the while there has been no progress yet for Lara. Lara did approach an independent pharmacy to see whether it could get access to the drugs and bring them here to dispense them, but the licence fee would cost thousands and the cost would be borne by Lara. It is just beyond her reach.

The current state of affairs remains frustrating for Lara and all the adults and children who need these drugs. I do not know how many more trips Lara can make to Holland—not just on a financial basis, but because of her health—and I am worried about her. The process that the Government have put in place is too protracted. All I can say is that I hope the Minister will heed the words of the motion and particularly the very sensible proposals from the all-party group. This is a case of urgent need. We cannot delay any longer. Please listen, Minister, and please give some positive feedback this evening.

6.14 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this timely debate. Let me start by picking up on something that my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) mentioned: all we are talking about is medicinal cannabis. We are not talking about making cannabis available for general recreational use. I am sure that there are Members of the House who would have an opinion on that, and we could have a full debate on it, but we are talking only about use for medicinal purposes. The wording of the motion is very important. When I read it, I saw that it stressed the practicalities of getting cannabis medicines prescribed. It is not about the general issue—we had the debate on that and the Home Secretary reached his decision—but about the practicality of getting some sort of result.

I realise that this is not easy for the medical profession and that the Government have initiated a review of the barriers to clinically appropriate prescribing. That is a very important review to undertake. I am aware that the National Institute for Health Research is going to participate in the review, which is a positive step, and I will set out what I think are a couple of the barriers that prevent prescribing.

What we are really waiting for is some NICE guidelines. I understand that they are coming, but they need to be brought along pretty quickly. We cannot wait for them forever, nor can the children who are suffering.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point and an excellent speech, which relates to the practicalities for children in my constituency such as Cole Thomson. His mother, Lisa Quarrell, has been trying to get medicinal cannabis for him for some time. Not only does she have to battle his absolutely debilitating epileptic illness, which gives him multiple seizures every day, and to see the deterioration each day in his condition, but she has to battle the medical system, battle with financial costs and battle the Government as they take one step forward and two steps back, giving hope and then taking it away. It is too much and too traumatic for any family in that situation to cope with.

John Howell: I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent intervention, and I agree with much of what she said.
One of the main barriers that I see is the simple question of who is allowed to prescribe. The General Medical Council holds a list—a specialist register—of specialist doctors who are allowed to prescribe. Why do we have a specialist list, and why can only those on that list prescribe? Is it because people are nervous about their careers or other things? Why do we limit the number of doctors who can prescribe in this way? I have read claims that something like 110 patients have been prescribed the medicine, but from what has been said in this debate, I understand that only one has received it.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend gives me a great opportunity to correct Hansard—I have received the message that there are two, both prior to the 1 November decision. In other words, the Home Office specialist team gave it to two, whereas none has had it since the Department of Health and Social Care took this over.

John Howell: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. The question is: why have so few—as he says, only two—actually received their medicine? Why has nobody else received them?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I have discussed this matter with Helen Stokes-Lampard, the chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, and she makes the point that there is not training available for GPs to feel confident enough to prescribe this medicine themselves.

John Howell: I will come to the point about training in a moment, if my hon. Friend will be patient, but he makes a valid point.

I appreciate that we have to go carefully, in view of the harm that the unrestricted use of cannabis might do, but the number of people who have received their drugs is a mere pinprick on the surface of those who need them. I am not surprised people go abroad to get their drugs, because it is the only source.

Sir Mike Penning: A person can only go abroad if they have reserves or a benefactor, if Grandma or Grandad is paying. If they do not have those things and are relying on the NHS, nul points—they don’t get it.

John Howell: I accept that point. In cases of children who need cannabis oil, I am aware of it being crowd-funded, which can be a valuable way of proceeding, but it seems a complete nonsense in a country that is proud of its NHS that people should have to go into the public arena to crowd-fund a drug.

I have some questions about this short list that the GMC maintains of doctors who can prescribe medical cannabis. How accessible are these doctors, and what is the waiting time to see one? These are practical barriers to people getting the drugs they need.

A young girl in my constituency—her name is not important—has intractable epilepsy and there is a great hope that medicinal cannabis would improve the quality of her life. Many women who suffer the sort of pain and discomfort she suffers during her menstrual cycle take birth control pills, which eases the pain considerably, but she cannot do that because it reduces the efficacy of her epilepsy medication and leads to a radical increase in the number of serious fits. For Hannah—that is her name—her epilepsy is life-threatening, as she is in a high-risk group of epilepsy sufferers who could experience sudden unexpected death in epilepsy syndrome, and we ought to think about how we can make it easier for her to obtain these drugs and so make her life easier. I mention that because to make these points we need to bring this debate back to examples of real constituents.

My second point is that raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) about the availability of guidance and training. In respect of both, there is a great lack of information, and it is not just us who lack information; so does the medical profession. We should do all we can to increase doctors’ knowledge and awareness so that, among other things, we can broaden out that list and GPs and family doctors can have the information they need to make decisions. I have no problem with this being a clinical decision rather than a political decision.

Crispin Blunt: We are where we are only because a politician, when faced with the inhuman cruelty of taking away from two children medicine obtained overseas when they returned to the UK, in the end refused to do so and issued a special licence. If this medicine is outside the scope of conventional medicine and the conventional assessment of molecular-based medicines, something will have to give if we are to get the benefit.

John Howell: I agree with my hon. Friend. The in-principle decision has been taken and the practical decisions now have to be taken by clinicians who are willing and fully trained to prescribe. The press releases and parliamentary answers are full of talk about finding the limit to the use of cannabis as a medicine. I listened to an exchange—I cannot remember who it was with—on its use to treat pancreatic cancer. From memory, I think the Minister gave a rather mealy-mouthed response. We need to think about extending the limits to other diseases.

In conclusion, I go back to where I started and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead on securing this debate, but the matter will not rest here. I do not think this will be the last time we have this debate. I hope we see some progress soon.

6.27 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank my co-chair of the all-party group on medical cannabis under prescription, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), for securing this Back-Bench debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it on the Floor of the House. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell).

I am committed to campaigning for medical cannabis under prescription not only for my constituents but for everyone in the UK who would benefit from access to whole-plant medical cannabis. Whole-plant cannabis contains CBD and THC. It is the interaction of both extracts taken together that provides significant relief from symptoms such as seizures, because it provides the entourage effect. The two extracts interact with the human body and produce a stronger influence than any one component alone.
We must remember the number of desperate families passed from pillar to post and blocked at every turn. Is the Minister going to sit back and watch them continue to suffer? We have families watching us from the Gallery, and their turn is now.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Lady makes a good point. I first became involved in this campaign in 2002 when I met my constituent, the late Biz Ivol, who had severe advanced multiple sclerosis and who told me that the pain she suffered was like having somebody draw barbed wire through her spine. For the last 17 years, we could have been exploring all the issues being ventilated tonight, but we have not. Does that not illustrate the urgency?

Tonia Antoniazzi: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will go on to talk about a very good friend of mine who suffers with MS.

Michael Fabricant: I have a constituent who is suffering from very advanced multiple sclerosis. She has been unable to obtain the medication she needs, and her husband is growing small amounts of cannabis to relieve her pain. However, it is not just her who is suffering. Staffordshire police do not want to act, although technically the family is breaking the law. That is an impossible position, is it not? It really is up to the Department of Health and Social Care to find ways in which cannabis can be prescribed more widely and more quickly.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely spot on. The issue of the law and people who are using cannabis as a medicine to relieve their pain is especially relevant to those with multiple sclerosis.

My very good friend Chris Reilly has progressive MS, and this week he had to go to hospital. His wife Beth called an ambulance, and it took an hour for the paramedics to be able to give him the correct amount of pain relief so that he could be taken to hospital. He is in touch with me all the time. When I was selected as the parliamentary candidate for Gower, he was the first person to contact me and tell me that this was a subject very close to his heart, and that he wanted me to become involved with it. I thank him for that, but it makes me cry that I cannot help him and cannot provide the medical cannabis for him. I know that I am standing here and making comments as a politician, and that I am not a medical expert, but we all know that when our constituents and their families visit our surgeries we share their pain and their tears because they cannot access something that would, quite simply, make their lives a lot better.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I completely agree. The families of children with intractable epilepsy are in exactly the same position, as are so many other people throughout the United Kingdom. My friend Chris is a very good example of how wrong it is that people with MS or epilepsy have no access to whole plant medical cannabis. As we know, it will never be a cure for everyone, but, as Chris told me yesterday, it provides the chance of a better quality of life. That is what people want. It is what the parents of children with intractable epilepsy want. They are at the end of the road. They have tried everything from the ketogenic diet to unlicensed drugs, which make the children unreceptive and do not improve their quality of life.

Sir Mike Penning: I pay tribute to my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group: without her support, we would not be here today. I feel for her constituent as well as mine. They are asking us to help, and we are doing everything we possibly can, but we are not medics and we cannot prescribe. Doctors seem happy to sign off and prescribe off-label drugs for purposes that have absolutely nothing to do with what those drugs were licensed for, but they are not willing to license medical cannabis. Does the hon. Lady not agree that that is an imbalance?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I do agree. It just does not make sense, which is infuriating, because I like to apply sense and logic to most situations, and the current situation is not logical.

Not being able to access medical cannabis leads people such as Chris and the parents of children with epilepsy to consider alternative ways of accessing cannabis, which—as has already been pointed out—is fuelling a dangerous online trade in which, for all we know, they could be buying anything. That is dangerous and wrong. Clinicians to whom I have spoken often ask parents what they have given their children in addition to over-the-counter drugs. Access to CBD alone has great health benefits that are not recognised by many in the medical profession. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead has referred to its being described as homeopathy. When one says that one of my interests lies in medical cannabis, there will always be someone—even a politician—who will make the pun about wacky baccy, and it is really not appropriate.

There seems to be a theoretical concern about the exposure of children to THC, but that is about recreational use; it is not about medical cannabis. Discussions about the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use and about the rescheduling of cannabis for medical use under prescription must not be conflated in the House. Let me put the position into perspective. The law changed because of one boy, Alfie Dingley, and the campaign spearheaded by his mum, the fantastic Hannah Deacon, who is in the Visitors’ Gallery today.

Crispin Blunt: And Billy Caldwell.

Tonia Antoniazzi: And Billy Caldwell, yes.

Alfie’s life has been transformed. He has been seizure-free for as long as 300 days, riding a bike and riding a horse. Hannah continues to campaign for parents who cannot gain access to medical cannabis for their children, who need the same treatment for their intractable epilepsy. The fact is that although the law has changed, the rules on access to medical cannabis are even more stringent as a result. Under the guidance provided by the British Paediatric Neurology Association, Alfie would not be eligible for his prescription, which beggars belief. The Government were aware that they were opening the
Tonia Antoniazzi: I entirely agree, and I am very concerned about it. We have heard in the House this evening that people are growing their own cannabis and there is a growing trade. There is an online family of people who are helping each other to obtain the most THC possible from different combinations of different plants. It is a complete industry. Why are the Government not getting a grip, and providing a proper, GMP-standard, pharmaceutical product for people?

I also want to talk about the cost, which is extraordinary. Has the Minister or anybody in her office done a cost-analysis? Alfie Dingley’s case provides a classic example: how much has he saved the NHS by not having emergency medication and not using the ambulance service to go into hospital? It seems nonsensical that we are not going down this road.

I want to talk about a couple of my constituents. Only a few weeks ago I had a visit from the parents of a 14-year-old son. My son is 14 too, so their situation is worse than that; however: we are driving a number of people into the hands of a criminal supply chain so that they can obtain their medicine, and that cannot be right.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I totally agree that a completely different approach is needed if we are to get the medicine to our families now.

It is very upsetting that families are risking getting criminal records by bringing in medical cannabis and are having to fundraise for prescriptions. I pay tribute to families that are fundraising in the public domain—to the parents and the friends, such as Craig who has cycled many, many miles up Pen y Fan recently to raise money for Bailey. I say to all those families that are raising money, “Don’t give up; there is hope, and hopefully we will be able to get you the medicine you need on prescription from the NHS.”

It would be very remiss of me to stand here and not pay tribute to the late Paul Flynn, former Member for Newport West. Paul was an absolute inspiration. I was a patron of an organisation with him and he was inspirational when I went to Birmingham to speak with him. His knowledge of and passion for medical cannabis was second to none, and I know that, as Madam Deputy Speaker mentioned, he is watching over us now and hoping we will get the breakthrough he was working so hard towards.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) spoke of a bespoke medical response and creative thinking, and I ask the Minister to work with us: pull groups of families out of local trusts and set up an immediate observational trial with the 18 families that we have at End Our Pain; get the NHS to pay for the costs of the medicine when a private prescription has been issued until NHS prescribing is more routinely accepted; and allow the guidance from medical cannabis experts to be used. Some excellent UK experts have come together to form the UK Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society, and they have issued prescribing guidance, too. I say, “Please, work with the NHS to give clear central guidance that medical cannabis is legal and that there is an expectation that it will be prescribed as a normal unlicensed medicine when appropriate.”

6.45 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who spoke so movingly and with such great sincerity on this important subject. I congratulate her and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate, which is incredibly important to my constituents.

Teagan Appleby is just nine years old and lives in Aylesham. She is wheelchair-bound and can suffer up to 300 seizures a day. She was born with a rare condition, Isodicentric 15, a severe form of epilepsy. Last year, she required life-saving treatment five times in just eight days.
Teagan’s mum, Emma, who is in the Gallery this evening, has been a tireless fighter not just for little Teagan, but for the medicine that little Teagan needs. Emma has tried everything to ease Teagan’s pain. One thing she could not try was cannabis oil, despite NHS trials showing that it could dramatically reduce epileptic seizures. The alternative suggested by doctors was Teagan having risky procedures on her brain. Understandably, like any parent, Emma does not want the surgeons getting out the scalpel and starting to operate on her daughter when alternatives are available.

That is why, last year, I urged the Home Secretary to intervene in Teagan’s case, along with many others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, who fought on this and I welcome the fact that he did so. Last October, the Home Secretary announced that cannabis would be medically prescribed by specialist consultants, yet the reality was somewhat different. Teagan’s treatment was still delayed, first due to the restrictive guidelines drawn up by the NHS and then due to supply issues.

I have visited Emma and Teagan at their home in Aylesham. It is incredible: all of us who are parents fight for our kids, yet somehow when we see someone in Emma’s situation looking after little Teagan we cannot help but think that some people fight harder than others. No one could fight harder than Emma does for Teagan. Teagan is so charming, and it seemed to me that things had improved, but Teagan was still suffering seizures during her sleep. Emma started fighting to get the stronger, THC form of cannabis, which has been discussed this evening, approved to see if it could stop the seizures entirely. She went to mainland Europe to get it, because she could not get it here, and it was seized on her return.

The latest position is that Teagan is getting better. She now goes whole days without seizures, which was extremely rare before. She can now walk short distances. Her doctor is so pleased that he has issued a fresh prescription, yet she still cannot get it on the NHS. The fact that it is legal but unlicensed means that Emma has to submit an individual funding request to the local clinical commissioning group. It takes weeks for those panels to meet, and weeks for them to make a decision.

That is why, in the meantime, Emma has to fork out thousands of pounds for bottles of cannabis oil. The price almost doubles when we add the import duties—that is, of course, when she does not have the extra hassle of having the oil seized at the border. That is also why Emma is having to consider going to Holland again to get this much-needed medicine for little Teagan. I ask the House this: should she not be supported and helped?

The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, with which I wholly agree.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, with which I wholly agree.

This is not just about speed; it is also about consistency. We can go to the local supermarket and buy ibuprofen, which people say is safe. We can buy as much as we like, yet we need a prescription for naproxen, a similar drug, because it is meant to be more dangerous. This is despite the fact that an article in the British Medical Journal in 2016 showed that, following experiments, the evidence concluded that the risk of heart problems was higher for people taking ibuprofen than for those taking naproxen, and that naproxen was less problematic and had fewer side effects than ibuprofen. Nothing has happened about this.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong point about consistency. Policy on the legalisation and decriminalisation of drugs is a reserved matter, in contrast to the delivery of health and social care, which is devolved. Does he agree that there should be consistent training and delivery programmes across the United Kingdom, so that people get the same standard of access to help for themselves and their families whether they are in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland?

Charlie Elphicke: I completely agree. The whole House knows that my hon. Friend is a true champion of his constituency and of the Union in which we live. It is important to have consistency so that anyone can go and practise, whether they are in England, Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. He makes an important point about the need to ensure that level of consistency.

It is also important to have consistency in the NHS, so that when the necessary evidence on drugs is available, the NHS takes action. It could, for example, look at the issue of naproxen and ibuprofen, rather than just carrying on regardless. It says that evidence is important, so it should be doing something about that. Indeed, in America, naproxen is not a prescription drug at all. People can just go and get it in their local drug store. In the same way, the NHS will not prescribe, or make it easy to prescribe, cannabis oil, yet it is easy to get codeine. For those with a bit more pain, it is easy to get tramadol, and for those with even more pain, there is morphine as well. Those opiates are legal and easy to get on prescription, yet we seem to have a mental barrier about cannabis and cannabis oil.

It is really important that we understand the importance of pain management and take it more seriously. We need to look at what can be done to ease pain for all people with all conditions, and we need to act swiftly and consistently on the evidence and without delay. That is why it is right that we should act to “End Our Pain.” We should act to help people such as Teagan and our many other constituents who are suffering. We need to act to end that suffering and pain, and to make it easier for them to get the medicines that they need to make a difference to their lives.
6.55 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for managing to schedule it so that we have enough time for a reflective, open and consensual debate—[Interruption.]

Sir Mike Penning: That is fair enough, and I want to maintain the tone of consensus in the debate. The licensing and classification of drugs remains a reserved issue, and the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Governments have to work and move forward together. The Scottish Government have indicated their willingness to do this, and we have to make sure that we move on. Frankly, in Scotland, we are always happy to take on more responsibilities and further devolution and, if we do not see the progress that is being sought, perhaps that is what we should do.

I want to speak about a specific constituency case that I have raised in the Chamber once or twice before. My constituents Laura Murray and John Ahern came to see me for the first time in November 2017, a few months after their beautiful daughter Bláthnáid was born. She has been diagnosed with Aicardi syndrome. With only around 4,000 cases worldwide, it is incredibly rare, but the symptoms are similar to those described by others and include frequent seizures and possible visual impairment. The treatment is limited, and the medicines that she has been prescribed are incredibly powerful, coming with their own debilitating side effects. The hon. Member for Gower made a powerful point about how much money the NHS has been spending—I appreciate that some of this is devolved—on providing emergency treatment and last-minute access to expensive drugs when the parents are keen to try an alternative.

Laura and John wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to describe the situation, saying that Bláthnáid “suffers multiple seizures every day and night which cause her extreme distress. They cause her to scream in pain, cry tears and become highly distressed, which is very distressing for her and us as parents and for her family to witness.”

Bláthnáid has been hospitalised due to the severity of her seizures, and whenever she is ill her seizures increase, and she ends up in hospital. This is no way to live for Bláthnáid, to continually suffer and have no quality of life.”

Sadly, we hear about too many similar cases. Bláthnáid’s parents are looking for access to full-extract medical cannabis and will otherwise be at their wits’ end. The situation is particularly galling because, as the wee girl gets older and becomes more aware of what is happening, things become even more frustrating and painful.

I have written to the Health Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. I want to work with people at every level. I will meet with Ministers, with the GMC and with the local health board—whoever I have to meet—to try to secure progress for this individual case, but it should not have to come to that. Almost every Member who has spoken has raised a constituency case or another specific case, which demonstrates that the overall regime has to change. Doctors having to take personal responsibility is a hurdle in several cases. I know that there is provision for second opinions on this side of the border and I want to discover how that can work in Scotland.

I hope that future decisions do not have to come down to individual interventions and that we can have a more permissive atmosphere. I appreciate the point about devolved and reserved matters, but I was a little disappointed simply to be batted to the Scottish Government by the ministerial correspondence unit after raising the issue on the Floor of the House and after including the personal...
It is interesting that the broader campaign is called “End Our Pain” because this does go beyond any one individual case. Dozens of constituents have been in touch in support of the campaign, because they see the benefit to themselves, their families and their friends. They see the benefit to wider society, and they have been moved by the different stories told throughout the campaign. “End Our Pain” refers not just to physical pain or the symptoms that any one individual is experiencing, but the frustration, the delays and the uncertainty. It means the pain of knowing that others are suffering unnecessarily and the pain of knowing that the solution is out there—if they could only get their hands on it.

As I have said, medical cannabis is an idea whose time has come. Public support is there. The evidence from other countries is there. The individual evidence based on when people have been able to access medical cannabis in the United Kingdom is there as well. The Scottish Government stand ready to play their part. I hope that the United Kingdom Government will also take this opportunity to act.

7.4 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who made a very good speech. It is always a pleasure to see someone fighting hard for their constituents, as we all are. He is right that all Members are mentioning similar cases, and I will also be doing so, but I first want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for the great passion and tenacity with which they have campaigned on the behalf of those who are suffering such pain. Sufferers are looking for a way to reduce their pain, and they believe that they have found one. That is the key challenge for us.

My case concerns a four-year-old girl called Indie-Rose. Her parents Anthony Clarry and Tannine Montgomery live in Clare in my constituency. Indie-Rose has Dravet syndrome and, as we have heard in other cases, suffers from frequent terrible seizures as a result of her epilepsy. Her parents have found that cannabis-based medicine reduces those seizures dramatically—they estimate by around 75%—but it comes at a huge cost, because my constituents have had to crowdfund thousands of pounds to go over to Holland, pay for the medicine and bring it back. I strongly feel that we must examine this issue because, as others have said, that situation cannot be sustainable, especially in a country that has a free healthcare system that is designed to help not just those in need but the most vulnerable in particular.

The compound that Indie-Rose’s parents have been purchasing is artisanal and unlicensed. It is a mixture of Bedrolite and Bedica, which of course contain THC, and the single greatest issue for me is that while there is evidence about the impact of CBD, there is little evidence about THC. When I first became involved in the case, I felt that I was in a duty to understand it more and to appreciate why there was resistance in what we might loosely call the medical establishment to prescribing a THC-based solution, such as that which was already being given to Indie-Rose and which was successfully, in her parents’ opinion, reducing her pain and suffering. I organised a meeting to discuss the situation in April at Addenbrooke’s hospital with some of the most senior clinicians that one could hope to have in a room, all of whom were familiar with Indie-Rose’s case. We are lucky to have hon. Members in this House with serious medical experience, but most of us are not clinicians, and none of us is the clinician in the cases that we are talking about. We are politicians, so I wanted to understand better the barriers to the NHS prescription that my constituents were seeking.

At times in this debate, the situation has been spoken of as if the argument is about whether cannabis-based medicine should be prescribed at all, but it is clearly about the type of medicines that should be prescribed. There is clearly nervousness in the medical establishment about THC. We should not hide from that point, and there is perhaps a very good reason for that point of view.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the points he is making are further evidence for why the conclusions of the interim report of the NHS review of the situation and the treatment requested by the Secretary of State, should be published as soon as possible? The report will help us to identify answers to my hon. Friend’s points, and it may help my constituents Evelina Lukoševičius, who is two years old, and Maya Fairlie, who is seven years old, to access this life-saving medicine—if, indeed, that is what the review concludes.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I would just be cautious about using the term “life-saving”, because this is about easing pain. These medicines are not cures; they relieve the pain of seizures. However, I understand my hon. Friend’s point, as we all did.

The meeting that I organised was instructive for me in many ways. Since then, I have obviously continued to correspond with my constituents to try to explain to them the powers that I have in this case and the next steps that they need to take. When this debate came up, they emailed to ask me to put one question to the Minister. Remember, they are not being prescribed THC-based compounds; they have been offered Epidiolex, which is a CBD-based medicine. They want me to ask whether any other children with epilepsy, or any other condition—of course, it is primarily complex epilepsy—have been prescribed THC-based medicines.

That information is in the public domain in the form of a written answer. As I understand it, 110 items—items, not people—of CBD-based medicine have been prescribed, along with 16 items of THC-based compounds, six of them on the NHS. That is an important point, as my constituents want to know whether others have been granted such medicines, and clearly they have. Where is the consistency? That is the confusion. Of course we cannot know the unique personal medical facts of each case, which must always be down to the clinicians, but we now know that THC-based solutions have been prescribed.

Sir Mike Penning: It is fantastic that we have the time to talk these things through. We do not have one NHS because, as my hon. Friend says, some people have been prescribed this. My constituent has been completely refused CBD, and the letter came back saying, “No, Mr Penning, we don’t give homeopathic therapies.”
[Sir Mike Penning]

The fear for those who use CBD is whether the European Commission will consider banning not the prescription but the public purchase of CBD. Apparently the Commission sees it as a novelty food, which we need to discuss because a lot of our constituents use non-THC products, which are perfectly legal, to ease their pain. My constituent has just texted me to say thank you because the medical company has given her some more oil, which the CCG has refused and thus her GP cannot write a prescription.

James Cartlidge: I am sure my right hon. Friend’s constituent is very pleased by that intervention. He underlines the key challenge, which is that these medicines are what is known as “artisanal”. They are unlicensed, and they are not standardised pharmaceutical medicines, which can be a problem for doctors who want to know their standard chemical make-up. Doctors feel they cannot entirely rely on these medicines. The nub of it is to what extent we in this place should be pressing those who have to make clinical decisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said that this has to be a clinical decision, and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made the brilliant point that, if not for us, we would not be in this position and what has been prescribed so far would not have been prescribed. Let us be honest about it; this has been the result of campaigning, which is why I congratulate all those who have campaigned.

Nevertheless, this ultimately has to be clinically based. We cannot have political prescribing. It may be that applying maximum pressure has resulted in some prescription decisions. I hope that is not the case but, in reality, it may have been. We must have a consistent, transparent system that we have faith in and that leads to clinical decisions delivering the best outcomes for our constituents.

Sir Mike Penning: That is exactly why NHS England is reviewing the blockages in the signing of prescriptions. The Minister can confirm this, but I understand that the interim report will come out by the end of this month, and I believe the full report will go to the Secretary of State by mid-June, which is very quick for the NHS.

There has to be a level playing field. It is not for us to tell the doctors but, if a suitably qualified doctor is prescribing it, what is the blockage for my hon. Friend’s constituent and for the rest of them?

James Cartlidge: That is what I have been trying to understand. If I were to hazard a guess, I think there has been institutional resistance to CBD in general, but particularly to THC. In a sense, we have helped to force an open-mindedness towards it. When people say there is no evidence, what they mean is that there is no evidence from standard clinical tests. The idea there is no evidence is not true, because the evidence is our constituents’ lives and what they are seeing every day. My constituents do not go to Holland, having crowdfunded all that money, to buy something that does not work. They are parents, and we must have faith in them—by the way, all the doctors put a lot of store in that—but nevertheless, the institutions whose guidance lays the foundations for medical decisions ultimately need clinical trial evidence for it to be sustainable, in addition to individual circumstances.

I welcome the Minister to her position, which she very much deserves. My appeal to her is that we put everything we possibly can into getting that empirical evidence and undertaking those trials so that we can say to our constituents that everything is being done to ensure that clinicians can make decisions with the greatest confidence and without the nervousness we have all encountered.

Finally, and this needs to be said, I was asked in my meeting, “You do realise we are being trolled?” We have had debates in this Chamber about the horrible abuse we receive—some of us, particularly female colleagues, have received obscene abuse—but members of the medical profession are now getting the same thing. I understand the frustration of a parent who has done everything they can to support their child and who feels that the system is not helping them. That is why we are having this debate, because we want them to be supported by the system, but there can be no justification for people in the medical profession being subjected to trolling and the sort of abuse I know they have received because they feel they have to make an objective decision. They have the best interests of the patient at heart, and I have faith in the medical profession. It is nervous because of the lack of evidence, so we need to move on with trials as quickly as possible. We need to be able to give our constituents confidence that the system is fair, transparent and consistent, and is not acting in an ad hoc fashion.

7.17 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who made a powerful and reflective speech. I particularly endorse what he says about the importance of having such evidence, a lot of which comes from the families themselves.

I join in congratulating the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on medical cannabis under prescription, both on securing this important debate and on the leadership role they have played on a cross-party basis in putting this important question on the House’s agenda.

As many Members have said, hopes were raised last year when the Home Office did what it did, and I strongly support what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said about the importance of achieving a bespoke solution for our country. In particular, I support what he said about learning from international evidence. That combination of listening to the families and the campaigners and learning from the evidence of other countries could assist us in achieving the urgency that we all want to see.

Sir Mike Penning: Every other country that has done this has done it in a bespoke way. The fear is that if we introduce a bespoke system for a product or drug, everybody else will jump on the bandwagon, but most countries in Europe have addressed this. It has to be bespoke, not least because cannabis was illegal as a schedule 1 drug in this country for so long, but the evidence is here in the mums and dads and the children.
Stephen Twigg: I endorse everything the right hon. Gentleman says, and his point about the evidence being here brings me to the main subject of my speech, which is to speak on behalf of my constituent Nathaniel Leaby and, in particular, his parents Lauren and James. His mum, Lauren, is here in the Gallery today. When Nathaniel was three months old he had his first seizure, and he was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder that resulted in his experiencing up to 100 epileptic seizures every day. His mum and dad were told by the doctors that his condition was so rare that, as far as they could see, it was the only case anywhere in the world. Eventually, he was prescribed Epidiolex, via the NHS.

Lauren has told me that initially Epidiolex did bring some positive effects but they were not sustained and they “plateaued”, in her word, so she looked for something that would do more to ease the incredible pain that her son was facing. She was unable to secure a prescription via the NHS, so she went to the Portland Hospital here in London, where the specialist, who was previously at Great Ormond Street Hospital, gave a private prescription for Bedrolite. That is the prescription Nathaniel is now benefiting from; it is making a difference to the quality of his life. The cost to the family of that private prescription is £2,200 a month; they are fundraising and crowdfunding funds in order to get that treatment for their son, but that surely cannot be right. We have heard from a number of speakers on both sides of the House about the principles of our national health service of meeting need and of people not having to contribute financially in that way. That figure of £2,200 a month is extraordinary, which is why I was keen to make a brief contribution in today’s debate.

We need to move forward based on the best available evidence, but part of that evidence is surely the voices of the families, and we need to make sure they are heard in this debate. Nathaniel recently celebrated his first birthday. I hope his mum does not mind my saying this, but she said to me earlier that it was a first birthday they were never sure he was going to see. They are very proud that he got to celebrate his first birthday. I hope that when the Minister closes the debate, she will be able to offer us not only some hope, but, perhaps more importantly, a sense of urgency that I can take back to my constituents and, in particular, to Nathaniel and his family.

7.22 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the House on this very important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to restrict my remarks to the subject matter of medical cannabis under prescription, particularly in respect of epilepsy. Comments have been made about the wider application of cannabis, and recreational and casual use, but that is not what we are talking about here today. We are dealing with the most serious medical issue, and I want to congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this debate on a matter of critical importance.

I too pay tribute to our good friend Paul Flynn for the work he did. I had the great honour of accompanying him when the Leader of the Opposition extended the octogenarian’s career development plan by appointing him as our shadow Leader of the House; many a chuckle we had on a Thursday morning, and we were the better for it.

I also pay tribute to Professor Mike Barnes. It is funny how our paths have been intertwined. When I was a lawyer representing the victims of serious injuries—particularly brain injuries—and their families, Professor Mike Barnes was a terrific fount of knowledge and expertise. It comes as no surprise to me that he has decided to devote his entire career to this critical issue, and no finer advocate or expert could we have in this cause.

I pay tribute to the parents of children suffering from epilepsy. I know Hannah is here, and I pay tribute to her and to Charlotte for the work they have done over the years.

May I also pay tribute to my wife, Sally? I have to put that right, because I never said it in my maiden speech—she will be pleased to realise that I am putting that right. As the parents of two boys with intractable epilepsy, we had the most incredible journey, and I am so grateful to her for everything she did for our children over the years. It was enormously difficult, as the seizures came with such regularity and force, and we had to become experts in the area. I will say some more about parents a little later, but when you have to understand the condition and the science of the drugs behind it, that is a huge demand on parents. We had suddenly to become not only expert in the condition, but expert dieticians, as we tried to embrace the ketogenic diet. Parents who have ever tried to deploy that as a way of dealing with the issue know just how difficult it is. It is a high-fat diet, where you are trying to starve your children, in the first instance, in order to put them in a state of ketosis, and that is incredibly difficult when you have your little one screaming at you that they are starving hungry.

Curiously, that technique was used in the middle ages. If someone was having a seizure, they were deemed to be possessed of the devil and they were thrown into a cell, where they were starved. The ketones would work and people would come back to the individual to find, “The devil has gone. The seizure is over.”

Some of the pain that people are suffering to this day is equally barbaric. We are hearing stories about parents who have not had access to treatments. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) made a point about this not being an issue; I do not want to misquote him, but I want to take on this point. This can be not only an issue of pain relief, but the difference between life and death. We know that from our own case, because we lost our son on 4 February 2006, after he entered into status. I look around and I am absolutely determined that no parent should have to run the risk of not having had the opportunity to explore this as a possible way of dealing with their child’s epilepsy.

Some terrific contributions have been made today. I pay tribute to all the speakers, because they spoke with such intelligence and expertise. There is a real common purpose to get this right—I know that that is the case—which is this House of Commons at its absolute best. I congratulate each and every one of the speakers who has contributed.

We have had an intelligent conversation about CBD and THC. Other jurisdictions have satisfied themselves that this is efficacious and a legitimate way of treating this intractable condition. We do not even need to look to those other jurisdictions; we need only to look at the parents who are having to go to such extraordinary lengths to deliver the treatment that they know works for their child. If it is acceptable across Europe, particularly
in the Netherlands, and in Canada and New York, the evidence base is there. The evidence base is in other jurisdictions and it is in the benefits derived by the children that we know about all too well.

I take the point so eloquently made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk: our wonderful clinicians have only one thought in mind—to bring about an improvement in a child’s condition and to alleviate the symptoms. He makes a very valid point. Not only does any clinician who has been put under the sort of pressure that the hon. Gentleman described have our sympathy, but the people who put them under such pressure really need to look at themselves in the mirror, because that is not how we go about addressing such a difficult issue.

I say to clinicians that if we need to address issues of training and expertise, let us get on with it. I suspect, and have heard from others, that some clinicians may feel somewhat inhibited and unable to respond in the way they wish. If it is a matter of sufficient knowledge and training, that should be addressed. It may be that clinicians are suffering under a misapprehension and are reluctant to act because of the spectre of clinical negligence claims. I say to them, as I say to all medics: please put that consideration to the back of your mind. Any practitioner who relies on evidence will not be criticised. If no reasonable practitioner would have prescribed that way forward, there is an issue, but if it is within the bounds of competence and of reasonable skill and there is a body of knowledge that would allow a practitioner to prescribe, they can dismiss those thoughts from their mind.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), I very much welcomed the change in the Government’s tone and approach not many months ago, for which they were rightly applauded. The tragedy is that that change has not been acted on since. Thousands of families across these islands are crying out to be given the facility that that change afforded. It has not happened and we are in grave difficulties.

I shall finish where I started. We must look to those parents who understand the condition and what works, and we must listen to them, because they are experts. I encourage clinicians to listen to their detailed evidence and the expertise they have built up. We simply cannot tolerate hard-working mums and dads having to go into hock to pay for these medications. The all-party group hears about the utter scandal of couples who are paying £1,500, £2,000 or £2,500 per month. I have no idea how they are carrying that burden. They have enough on their shoulders. There is a solution that we know works. Parents should be given the opportunity to bring some stability to their child’s condition and, while they are at it, some solace and peace to their own lives. They have their expertise; we should listen to them and do the right thing by them. The evidence is there and we should embrace it and get this logjam unblocked at the earliest possible opportunity.

7.33 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald). I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for bringing this hugely important debate to Parliament.

The families of severely ill children and patients who had lived for years with conditions such as MS that meant a life of extreme pain believed that they had been offered a lifeline when the Home Secretary rescheduled medicinal cannabis so that it could be prescribed to patients who needed it. Six months on, hope has turned to despair as we are now in the unconscionable position whereby medicinal cannabis has been legalised but is almost impossible to access. It turns out that the policy change last year has so many ifs and buts and is steeped in so much bureaucracy that it is not yet worth the paper it was written on. The public are understandably bewildered and confused.

We have all heard the stories of parents who want only to protect their children from severe pain being denied life-saving drugs or having them confiscated by immigration officials. While the NHS and the medical professions are having arguments over what constitutes evidence on who is eligible for the drug, children and patients are suffering needlessly every day. It is a shameful situation and, as is so often the case, the Government’s defence is to say, “It’s nothing to do with us.” They have distanced themselves from the implementation of their own policy and outsourced the tricky bits to those on the frontline who have been given little support or guidance. In doing so, the Government have let so many people down. They have left seriously ill patients to fend for themselves—to be pushed from pillar to post, unable to find an NHS clinician willing to prescribe the only meds that control their seizures.

The campaign group End Our Pain, which is supporting more than 20 desperate families of children with intractable epilepsy, are having to help to fundraise around £2,000 a month to finance trips abroad to get access to the medical cannabis that the children need. This issue has nothing to do with illegal drugs and neither is it a Home Office issue; it is a public health issue. More than that, it is a humanitarian issue. The evidence is clear—certainly to the parents whose children are alive because of CBD—that the benefits outweigh any negative effects, so why are patients still cruelly suffering? Parents and patients are being criminalised, forced to go abroad or to order off the dark web to get hold of the life-saving medicines they were promised they would be able to access legally. I realise the importance of a proper regulatory development process to coincide with the new policy, but why is it taking so long?

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about the ineffectiveness of the new regulatory regime and how it is not working for families. I have a constituent called Lorja Emerson, and many campaigning Members from all parties will have met her father, who is in the Public Gallery. He was one of the first to receive a prescription under the new regulations. It has to come from a private clinic and it costs him exorbitant amounts of money, and even then he has to pay to fly to London to get it because he cannot cash the script in Northern Ireland. Even when it is operating, the system is not working for Mr Emerson or his daughter.

Mohammad Yasin: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who makes a powerful point. That is why we are debating this issue today and urge the Government...
to take urgent steps and make these drugs available for children who are suffering. We can save lives by legalising them.

The evidence base and research surrounding the new policy must be called in and disseminated as soon as possible, and the barriers to clinically sound prescribing, including any training and support for prescribing doctors, must be addressed urgently. Yes, we have to get the policy implementation right and safe, but it is cruel and unjust to keep patients suffering while the Government hide behind a wall of red tape.

Earlier, I mentioned what had happened with other life-threatening diseases, such as HIV, and what had happened at other times. We have now changed, relaxed and modified the rules around testing, but that was not done immediately. Those who remember will know that there was a vociferous campaign from people, particularly in America but also here in Britain, about the folly of this requirement for pre-existing medical knowledge. The shift was to look at harm: what is the harm done to not trial and not implement anything versus what is the harm done of any potential risks. In this case, we need to employ that kind of sense. Back then, it was not the clinicians or the Government who shifted the issue; the shift was achieved through the fantastic work of campaigners.

We are again seeing that fantastic work of campaigners. They may need the drug themselves, or one of their family may need the drug, and so they are having to push this debate. It is frustrating to some extent that we have not learned the lessons of previous eras when this issue was argued out. In fact, time and again, the issue has been won on the side of prescribing. Why this time are we coming down on the wrong side of the argument? What is it about cannabis that suddenly sets off some kind of alarm bell in the heads of Ministers or civil servants so that we create a system that is not particularly conducive to prescribing?

I am bemused by the current situation in which, for some reason, private prescriptions are acceptable—others have talked about this—and seem to be getting through if people can raise the right amount of money, but our NHS is not able to reflect that. I do not know whether that is a consequence of cuts or of an NHS that is at breaking point. It could be a consequence of commissioners not wanting to prescribe these drugs, which seems strange to me because, when I look at the figures, the cost does not seem too high. It is cheaper than prescribing some other traditional medicines. It seems to me therefore that this is not an austerity issue, which we know is a bigger problem in the NHS, but some other hidden force, which means that parents need to raise thousands and thousands of pounds to try to get private prescriptions and self-prescribe.

I would like to slightly widen the debate from children, on whom we have quite rightly focused, to some of my constituents who are adults in chronic pain. Although it is right that, through the story of a child, we can push this issue forward, the fact is that this drug could help millions who, as we have heard earlier, may already be on whom we have quite rightly focused, to some of my constituents who are adults in chronic pain. Although it has been won on the side of prescribing. Why this time are we coming down on the wrong side of the argument? What is it about cannabis that suddenly sets off some kind of alarm bell in the heads of Ministers or civil servants so that we create a system that is not particularly conducive to prescribing?

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high for them to be able to prescribe it now. He has now resorted to getting medical cannabis from other sources—to some extent involving his doctor or his clinician and creating a network of people having almost to lie and deceive the state. It is a bizarre situation. We end up making people do things in hushed conversations, rather than being able to record things properly in medical records.

This absurdity must end. We thought that it had ended. My view is that the scheduleisation of drugs should not fall under the remit of the Home Office; it should be in the Department of Health and Social Care. It makes no sense for scheduling to be anywhere near the Home Office, because it should be based on medical evidence—the Home Office should, of course, decide on classification. The Department of Health and Social Care needs to make some real moves very quickly to demonstrate that this has not all been hot words and big let downs.

7.47 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I wish to extend my thanks to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate here today.

Several speakers have been quick to explain that this debate is about medical cannabis and not cannabis for recreational use, and, within the context of this debate, that is quite correct. The fact that we feel the need to explain that is a strong indication that there is, in the wider audience, a great deal of mistrust born through ignorance of what cannabis actually is. We even start getting confused when we try to differentiate between cannabis and hemp. What we have here is a mess of our own making.

This is about a plant that can be grown in the UK and, indeed, is already grown in the UK but under licence from the Home Office—more about that later. It is a plant that is good for the soil in which it grows; a plant of which almost every single part can be utilised to make bio-degradable plastics, bio-degradable cloth and, as we know, medicines; and a plant that has been cultivated for thousands of years in various forms. Why do we have an issue with it? Why has cannabis been demonised? When we mention the word cannabis, why for the majority of people does it conjure up the image of somebody sparking up a joint, a spliff, a jay, a doobie, or a roach? It is because, in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, this place got it horribly wrong. It fell in with the prohibitionist mantra from the USA and it made a range of drugs illegal.

Before then, we controlled their use; we tolerated that use socially; and we prescribed them as required. It was actually called the “British system”, and it worked. No criminal gangs controlled the production and distribution. There was no escalation in violence to protect the marketplace, no county lines and a lot less corruption. But with that one incredibly clumsy Act, we demonised the entire plant.

If we were talking about medical hemp today, a range of folk would be more open to the discussion, but because of one cannabinoid in the plant—tetrahydrocannabinol or THC—we have ignored the other 100-plus cannabinoids. We remain ignorant of the benefits they can bring and of how they interact with the endocannabinoid system that each and every one of us has in our own bodies.

The lack of medical research in the UK has led to an entirely unsuitable situation, and my frustration is that we seem to be in no hurry to clear it up. Why are we not moving heaven and earth to license products that are used widely in other countries? Across the UK today, people are suffering needlessly. The medicines exist and are being prescribed and used elsewhere, but the UK Government’s attitude is, “Nobody knows better than us.” We now find ourselves in a position where we are being forced to fight this issue one case at a time.

We brought Alfie Dingley to No. 10 to meet the Prime Minister. That seemed to make a difference. Billy Caldwell’s mum brought the matter to a head by attempting to bring the product into the country. That moved things on, too. And in their situation, would any of us not do the same? Would we not do whatever it took to gain access to medicine for our children? We cannot keep on fighting this on a case-by-case basis. It is cruel and heartless, and there are simply too many kids out there who could benefit now. I apologise to the many people who suffer with arthritis, multiple sclerosis and cancer, because we do not shout about them as much, and they also need to be listened to. The sad fact is that this Government have shown that it takes heart-breaking cases of kids with epilepsy to bring them to the table.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): Would my hon. Friend confirm my understanding that, for the 10,000 people with MS who could benefit from cannabis for medical use, nothing has changed since 1 November 2018, when the Government made it legal for specialist doctors to prescribe cannabis-based medical products? Am I correct in thinking that that is true?

Ronnie Cowan: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I have a briefing from the MS Society that illustrates his point. It says that, since Thursday 1 November 2018: “Nobody with MS has so far benefitted from the change in the law, and access to cannabis-based medicinal products remains very limited. This includes access to Sativex”.

Sativex is a licensed product. Of course, people can get it privately if they can spare £500 a month.

As I have said, the system is cruel and heartless. Let us look at one example of how stupid our current laws are and how damaging they are to the patients we are supposed to be helping. If a child suffers from certain forms of epilepsy, there is good evidence that a cannabis-based medicine called Bedrolite may be of great help. Any parent or guardian in that situation would want to access Bedrolite. I know of one child who was having 16 seizures a day and is now on Bedrolite. As of today, that child has been free of seizures for 50 days. Can we begin to imagine how great that is for the child and for his surrounding family and friends? But his supply is running out and his mother said to me yesterday, “I can’t let my boy get sick again.” What has she got to do to keep her boy well?

The good news is that people in the UK can get Bedrolite—if they are rich, if they fundraise, or if they go to a private clinic, pay for a prescription and then pay £560 per bottle. For one patient I know, that equates to £28,000 a year. And that is not the most expensive case I know of—not by a long way. I know of cases
where it would cost people twice that much to medicate their children. If people are prepared to break the law to provide medicine for their child, they can travel to the Netherlands and purchase Bedrolite for £167 a bottle, reducing the annual cost to £8,100 a year, plus travel and accommodation costs, but those people risk being arrested and separated from the child they are trying to help.

I know of a wee boy in Scotland whose mum has brought back oils illegally from the Netherlands. He recently went through a bad spell of cluster seizures. Normally, he would be in hospital, unconscious, and unable to walk, eat, speak or swallow. This time, he has remained at home and has not needed any rescue medication. His mother should not have to pay thousands of pounds a month and break the law trying to help her sick child. It is no wonder that the scammers have moved into this marketplace. As a parent wrote to me yesterday to explain,

“The vultures are preying on very vulnerable desperate families and selling fake or non filtered oils which is unsupported and also very dangerous”.

This highlights another problem. When we sit back and do nothing, scammers and criminals will move in. People will say, “I’m buying a product that is cannabis, but it’s not doing me any good.” Then the Government will take another step back and say, “Well, the evidence simply is not there.”

People’s last option is to do what the Government have said they should do. To access medical cannabis, someone must have tried medical cannabis and experienced benefits, but, as I have pointed out, that involves either a lot of money or breaking the law. That is what the Government are asking parents to do. A person must have exhausted all other drugs, despite knowing they do not work and have many dangerous side effects; we are asking people to endure side effects and disappointment to justify their request. Once they have done that, they find that their GP cannot prescribe under the current system and that specialists are reluctant to do so because they are going out on a limb and fear reprisals from the medical community.

We have a situation where the UK Government say, “We have a system,” and absolve themselves of their responsibility and duty of care to the citizens of the United Kingdom. I was going to ask the Minister explain why we cannot treat any cannabis-based medical products as schedule 2 drugs under the statutory instrument where that product has been prescribed by a medical practitioner in another jurisdiction, but of course we have a Health Minister in front of us today, not a Home Office Minister.

Yet again, this problem falls between two stools. The Home Office or the Department of Health and Social Care—who will take responsibility for this issue and move it forward?

While we delay, the privatised UK cannabis business grows and the privatised pharmaceutical companies are controlling the available products with an iron fist. It looks as though we are restricting the provision of medical cannabis while we evaluate a marketplace and develop products with the intention of making a lot of money out of it, but the Government would not be that cruel, would they? Not deliberately! The Government do not have a vested interest in the pharmaceutical industry, do they? They are not granting licences to their pals to grow cannabis or encouraging family members to invest in pharmaceutical companies with a vested interest, are they? Surely not. But of course, we know that they absolutely are. That is the backdrop to the photo opportunities and the sympathetic words of staged understanding from Ministers. Unless someone has a child living in these circumstances, they cannot possibly understand the need, the frustration and the anger. As politicians, we are elected to listen to the people. The parents and guardians of these young men and women are screaming at us, “Give us access to affordable, legal medication for our children, and do it now.”

7.58 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): This has been a very powerful and emotional debate that has moved Members on both sides of the House. It has also been characterised by anger and exasperation on both sides. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this subject for debate.

I pay tribute to my former, much-respected colleague, Paul Flynn, for his excellent campaigns on this subject. Somewhere, he will be cheering us on and I hope that he will have more to cheer about by the end of this debate, when we hear the Minister’s comments. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi); their unflinching commitment to this cause does them credit. Thanks is also due in no small part to the all-party parliamentary group, whose dedicated purpose is to “help secure access to natural cannabis for medical purposes in the UK under prescription from a medical professional.”

The group has worked tirelessly to that end, highlighting the barriers that exist and posing constructive suggestions to remove them.

As the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) rightly said, we are not concerned today with criminals and illegal drug supplies. We are not concerned with the use of recreational drugs. We are considering a most important health issue. I welcome the fact that at long last the Government accept that the therapeutic use of cannabis is a public health issue and not the business of the Home Office. I trust, therefore, that we will never again see parents in possession of medicinal cannabis products accosted and treated like criminals. I refer of course to the disgraceful treatment meted out to Teagan Appleby’s family.

Cannabis has long been known to contain active ingredients that could have therapeutic use in the treatment of many conditions, including muscular dystrophy, Parkinson’s disease, Crohn’s disease, cancer, AIDS, sickle cell disease and many more. International research and real-life experience in the UK have shown that the active ingredients CBD and THC, in combination, can provide relief for these conditions. There are also strong indications that these medicinal cannabis products can have a transformational effect in paediatric epilepsy cases. In the UK, though, we have been very slow to accept this and even slower to act to help those who could be helped.

Other powerful drugs with significant street values, such as heroin and diazepam, have long been available on the NHS under the supervision and control of qualified clinicians. Such drugs are extremely harmful in the wrong hands, but, subject to the existing controlled drugs regulations, these products can be used beneficially.
In recent years, we have made some progress and have begun to accept that cannabis could and should be available in the same way. This changing attitude has most definitely been driven by increased public awareness of the suffering of individuals, many of them children.

Jim Shannon: Just to reiterate what the hon. Lady is saying, my young constituent Sophia has not been hospitalised with an active seizure in 10 months. I quote her mum:

“Our little lady just amazes us every day and we are very blessed to be in this position but we can’t help but think of the thousands of other children and adults that could need this right now!!!!”

Does the hon. Lady agree that we must ensure that we are making progress? This debate is about progress and moving forward, so it is important for the Minister to do just that.

Julie Cooper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I absolutely agree. There is the potential to help thousands. We must move forward at the earliest opportunity.

Members have raised some powerful cases on behalf of their constituents—adults and children who could benefit. I want to mention the experiences of the Griffiths family. Mrs Griffiths asked me to help her nine-year-old son, Ben. Ben suffers with severe intractable epilepsy. This means that he has up to 300 seizures a day and has come close to death on more than one occasion. At the new year, Ben was admitted to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital, where, during an 18-hour period, he was observed to have 200 seizures. Ben’s parents asked whether he could have access to CBD and THC, but they were informed that Alder Hey has a blanket ban on medicinal cannabis products containing THC. Ben was discharged and his discharge letter stated that his parents had asked for an illegal drug.

In desperation, the family have turned to a private neurologist and, thanks to him, since January this year, Ben has been taking medicinal cannabis CBD and THC. His condition is much improved and yesterday he had only four seizures. His family tell me that Great Ormond Hospital and Professor Finbar O’Callaghan, the head of the British Paediatric Neurology Association, have acknowledged Ben’s improved condition, but the family are still unable to get an NHS prescription to have access to CBD and THC. Ben was discharged and his discharge letter stated that his parents had asked for an illegal drug.

In July 2018, the chief medical officer published a report declaring that there was conclusive evidence of the therapeutic benefit of cannabis medicinal products and she recommended that the whole class of cannabis medicinal products be rescheduled under the misuse of drugs regulations. The Home Secretary listened and, on November 2018, the Government agreed to reschedule cannabis for medical purposes. This was a very welcome step, making it legal for doctors on the specialised register to prescribe unlicensed whole-plant cannabis products for medicinal use in the UK. On that day, hundreds of families across the country celebrated, believing that this meant that they would have access via the NHS to medicinal cannabis. Sadly, that has not been the reality. Not one single NHS prescription has since been written for whole-plant medical cannabis and the hopes of many have been cruelly dashed.

Ironically, changing the legal status of medicinal cannabis has actually made the situation worse. Prior to that change in legislation, the Home Secretary had the power to grant special licences to make medicinal cannabis available. The Home Secretary no longer has that power. Now supplies are conditional on both clinical sign-off and a funding agreement, and that is not happening. I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State want to resolve the problem. I also know that the Secretary of State has met some of the affected families and has promised to help them. But the clock is ticking. The End Our Pain campaigners are absolutely clear that this is a matter of life and death. It is now two months since the Secretary of State met the families and, in that time, not one single NHS prescription has been written for medicinal cannabis that contains both CBD and, crucially, THC. There are many good intentions, but the Department’s implementation procedures following the rescheduling of medicinal cannabis are not fit for purpose.

The Secretary of State has said repeatedly that he cannot overrule the judgment of clinicians. A principle of action we do not expect him to do so. We do, though, expect that he recognises that these are exceptional circumstances of great urgency and urgent special action is required. It is clear that the procedures are not working and we cannot rely on a “business as usual” approach. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said, we need a bespoke solution. We need an acknowledgement that cannabis is a special case. We need a broader analysis of the evidence for the efficacy of medicinal cannabis that brings together worldwide research with the experience of patients and families in the UK who have benefitted from using medicinal cannabis. While NHS England investigates the causes of the blockages in the implementation process, the NHS needs to step in to meet the costs of private prescriptions.

We need improved education and support for medical practitioners with regard to medicinal cannabis. The current guidance for prescribing medicinal cannabis needs to be changed to support and protect prescribing clinicians who prescribe, following best practice, in the best interests of their patients. We need the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS to stress that medicinal cannabis is legal and that there is an expectation that it will be prescribed in the same way as any other unlicensed medicine when appropriate. We need a guarantee on funding. We need to know that everyone right across these islands, wherever they live and whichever CCG governs the healthcare in their community, has access to funded products where appropriate. Good intentions on their own are not good enough: we need urgent action.
8.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): This has been a very moving and important debate. As I know from my own constituency, and as has been outlined with such passion by Members on both sides of the House, this matter leads to great distress for patients and their families. I recognise the deep frustration of families and patients, which has come across strongly this evening. All of us who are parents or who have cared for a loved one can empathise with them. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and his wife Sally, who shared their experience with us. It is them and parents like them whom we are concentrating on this evening.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), all their work on the all-party group and their tenacity in keeping this issue on the agenda. Many points have been raised. Great frustration has been expressed and I have heard that. I will be speaking to the Secretary of State again and taking back all the messages to the officials, but I will try in my remarks to answer the points made.

In November last year, the law was changed to ensure that doctors on the specialist register of the General Medical Council can legally prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use in the UK. It is right that we put these decisions in the hands of clinicians because they are the ones with the best knowledge of all the treatments available for conditions in which they specialise. The Secretary of State and I have been clear that whether to prescribe must remain a clinical decision, to be made with patients and their families, taking into account the best available international clinical evidence—I want to reassure the House that we are in close contact with colleagues in other countries to ensure that we learn from their experiences—and the circumstances of each patient.

It is not for me as a politician to second-guess or pillory clinicians’ decisions. I was alarmed to hear my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) say that doctors are being trolled for the decisions they are or are not making. They have the best interests of their patients at heart and their primary focus is to do no harm. But I recognise that we do not have the optimal system in place yet. It is undesirable that patients are travelling abroad. The Secretary of State and I are determined to do everything we can to ensure that patients can obtain medicines in this country if it is medically appropriate. There are already systems in place to do that and I want to do everything I can to understand why patients are not using those systems to access medicines here in the UK.

We want to continue to refine the system so that the demands of patients who want to try medicinal cannabis are balanced against other demands on NHS funding. Given the embryonic state of the evidence base on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of medicinal cannabis, that is not easy. However, we are working hard to ensure we get this right, because it is crucial. I have had many discussions about this with my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), who spoke with great passion. He mentioned the need for more evidence and the issue of growing a market. We will explore that with the Department for International Trade.

I want to pick up on a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made about the number of prescriptions issued since November last year. Data show that, until the end of February, there had been six items issued in the community under NHS prescription. He thought there were none at all.

Sir Mike Penning: The evidence from the families and the APPG that I co-chair is that there have only been two. If the Minister knows of six, we would love to know not the individual cases but where the other four have come from. The families are confused because at the moment we only know of two.

Seema Kennedy: My information is that there are six and I will happily write to my right hon. Friend with more information.

As the House heard last month, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has met many of the families and patients who Members know through their work on the APPG or their constituencies. All of us could not help but be moved by these distressing cases and the continued efforts of those who support loved ones. The Secretary of State asked NHS England to conduct a process review to identify any inappropriate barriers to clinically appropriate prescribing. I am pleased to say that the review is under way, and NHS England is working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, the all-party parliamentary group on medical cannabis under prescription and patient representative bodies to identify cases that might best illustrate the experience of a range of patients.

Sir Mike Penning: We have lots of time, but the Minister is being generous in giving way. Can she confirm when the interim report will be issued on the blockages and when the final report will be made to the Secretary of State? It was indicated to us at a meeting with NHS England only last week that there would be an interim report by the end of May and a report to the Secretary of State in June. Would the Minister like to confirm that?

Seema Kennedy: I will come on to timelines later in my remarks. NHS England is currently obtaining patient consent and scheduling the necessary interviews with clinicians, decision makers and their patients. The first interviews were held today.

I want to touch briefly on devolved matters. Health is a devolved matter, but officials across the UK have been working closely on the development of this policy. The law is exactly the same in all four countries of the UK and only funding is devolved. Members have said that clinicians might be nervous about prescription and that we need to improve training. I will talk about this later, but the training package that has been commissioned from Health Education England will be made available across the UK.

Jim Shannon: The Minister has heard my comments on behalf of my young constituent, Sophia Gibson, who is getting medicinal cannabis through the trust area. May I suggest that, if that is how it is done for my constituent in Northern Ireland, it could be done for people across the rest of the United Kingdom through their trust area or non-governmental organisations—wherever the responsibility lies?
Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Prescription is in the hands of the clinician. Whether the prescription is paid for is ruled on locally and I will talk about that later.

I would like to tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead that a report, including any recommendations, is expected shortly. We will carefully consider any further action we might take to improve access in the light of that report and the clinical guidelines that are due to be issued by NICE. Members are rightly frustrated with the slow pace, because of the distressing cases and because of examples they have seen from abroad. NICE guidelines have been expedited. They would normally take two years to produce, but these guidelines will come out in half that time, this autumn.

Members have said that patient expectations are not being met and that clinicians are taking an overly cautious approach. With new medicines, we need a strong evidence base. That base is still in development, partly because of the historical overhang.

Crispin Blunt: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: I was about to refer to my hon. Friend, but I will let him speak for himself.

Crispin Blunt: The Minister was probably going to pick up the point I made about the assessment of the risk-reward ratio. Humanity has goodness knows how many thousands of years of use of this plant, and it may need a different risk-reward assessment base from the classic medical variety. Sitting in the background for many thousands of years of use of this plant, and it

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point, as he always does. The normal NHS medicines governance systems apply, and they are being used to support good clinical practice and safe and effective prescribing, but we could of course do more to educate and support the health profession.

I want to pick up another point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, about who does the prescribing of these medicines. These are not frontline medicines, and it is right that specialists who have detailed knowledge of all the treatments available for these particularly difficult cases are the ones who should be responsible for prescribing. Cannabis-based products would not normally be considered until a patient was at the stage in their treatment pathway when they were under the treatment of a specialist.

On education, Health Education England has been commissioned to develop an online training package. The aim of the package is to familiarise those working in the health sector with the change in the law and provide straightforward information about the products and what is known about their mechanisms of action. It will support and underpin the knowledge and understanding gained by specialists as experience in prescribing these products grows.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is being generous in taking interventions. She has set out the risks, but may I pay tribute to her and the Secretary of State, who have not simply looked at all the risks and roadblocks that medics put up, but have said how important it is to produce answers, find solutions and take things forward? I urge them to continue with this excellent work to make sure that progress is made, and to continue to push forward.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend. That is why, after the urgent question last month, the Secretary of State issued the process review. As I have said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, that review will be reporting shortly.

We cannot be sure that cannabis-based products are safe or effective. There is a body of anecdotal evidence of therapeutic benefit, and the chief medical officer concluded that the evidence was sufficient to recommend that these products be considered for rescheduling from schedule 1 to schedule 2 under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, and that their medicinal benefits be further examined. All products in schedule 2 can be prescribed; cannabis-based products for medicinal use are no exception.

I want to talk quickly about the evidence base. Some people have talked about randomised controlled trials, which are what we normally use when there is evidence. As hon. Members have said, parents are arbiters of this evidence. The normal procedure is that we do not base prescribing decisions on anecdotal evidence, which is why we have asked the NIHR to stimulate further research. We need to build up the existing evidence base, including through observational trials.

Julie Cooper: Does the Minister accept that these are not normal circumstances? These families and parents are absolutely desperate to access the medication that they have seen work for themselves. Can she find some way to circumvent the usual processes?

Seema Kennedy: I recognise the deep pain that families are going through, and I do take the point about the great frustration and desperation of the families. What I would say is that we have asked for more evidence, and we are working with everybody necessary to try to get this done as quickly as possible. NICE is internationally recognised for its robust and evidence-based evaluations and guidelines.

Ronnie Cowan: I have two families in my constituency whose children are both suffering from epilepsy. They are taking Bedrolite today, and the families know it is beneficial for their kids. That is anecdotal evidence, but it is in their houses and they can see it working. The prescriptions for the sources they have will run out in June and in July. Can the Minister tell me what I should say to those parents when their kids’ prescriptions run out?

Seema Kennedy: I do not feel able to comment on a specific issue when I am not a doctor, a clinician or a scientist—

Ronnie Cowan: As a parent?

Seema Kennedy: Of course I could as a parent, but again, I am not a doctor, and I am not here to make that call. What I would say is that I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to get more of the facts he is presenting to me.
What is needed to support such prescription is evidence of efficacy, and for public funding evidence of cost-efficacy. That is the system we apply to all medicines and medical devices. In the UK, and the rest of the EU, cannabis-based medicines would not be treated any differently. The current evidence base has been summarised by the professional bodies in their interim clinical guidance, and it will be further examined and reported on by NICE shortly.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I have one question for the Minister: has the cost analysis been done on a particular case? When I spoke earlier, I spoke about Alfie Dingley. It would be very interesting to see the impact of his case financially—the benefit that has been gained to the NHS and the money that it has saved the NHS since he has been taking the drug.

Seema Kennedy: I apologise to the hon. Lady, because she did ask me that, and I am afraid I forgot to send a note to the Box. I am happy to write to her about whether that analysis has been done.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk, talked about funding. Funding decisions are local decisions with clear local procedures. The process review is looking at this, and as I have said, it will report shortly. I call on the industry to invest in more trials, and to publish the results and the full underpinning data, because we all want to see licensed products that doctors can use with confidence.

Where there is supporting evidence, the Government and the NHS will work with companies to make the products available. Indeed, more than 110 patients are now being treated with a pure CBD extract product—Epidiolex, which numerous hon. Members have referred to—an early access programme, ahead of a licensing decision by the European Medicines Agency. In developing a licensed product, the evidence has been generated on the safety profile and effectiveness of the product. It is this that provides clinicians with the confidence to prescribe and the system with the evidence it needs to make decisions on routine funding. The NHS does not routinely fund any new medicine until it has been through a process of evaluation to ensure that it is safe, effective and represents value for money.

On another point that the hon. Member for Gower brought up, about one of her constituents going on the Epidiolex trial, the specialist centres around the country are referring patients to GW Pharmaceuticals. There are certain criteria and a certain number of places, but if she wrote to me, I would be happy to meet her and we could discuss that further.

We need to develop further our knowledge base on these products. That is why good-quality clinical trials are imperative. We need to know more about the scale of the benefit of cannabis-based products across a wide range of indications. We also need to understand how this compares with existing treatments and, indeed, other promising new drugs that may be as effective.

Seema Kennedy: I cannot say what will be in the trials, because I am not a scientist running them. What I can say is that we have made the call and want everybody who can to take part in the trials so that we have a much fuller picture and can get to a situation where we have licensed products that doctors feel safe prescribing.

I will conclude by thanking all hon. Members who have taken part in this useful debate. This is an extremely difficult area, and hon. Members have spoken movingly about heart-rending cases. I hope that I have shown that the Government take this very seriously. We are committed to ensuring that policy is implemented in a safe and sustainable way, making cannabis-based products available to patients where clinically appropriate.

8.29 pm

Sir Mike Penning: Not only was I enormously proud when I went before the Backbench Business Committee to ask for this debate last Tuesday, but I was a bit shocked to get the debate this afternoon—at least we have not had to go home early. We have had an absolutely brilliant debate.

To be honest with the Minister, I am not sure how far this has taken us. Fundamentally, I have an issue with the fact that there are families who, through crowdfunding, or however they fund it—I understand that some parents have had to remortgage—are getting this drug for their children perfectly legally, and qualified consultants and specialists are issuing prescriptions on the NHS, but they are not being honoured. That is something that the Department of Health and Social Care is wholly responsible for. I fully accept that there are other issues to do with the Home Office.

Many people have been marched up to the top of the hill. I accept that for many years, when Paul Flynn was campaigning on this and a Government of a different colour were in office, it did not happen because it was in the “too difficult” pile called schedule 1. We are not in that position now; we are in a position where this House—we have now debated this issue for four and a half hours—can tell the country and the Government that what is happening now, with people who can afford it getting this medicine and those who cannot afford it not getting it, has to stop. This Government have to stop that.

I know how difficult it is. I was the Home Office Minister responsible when this was discussed. I was the Minister who stood at the Dispatch Box. I know the blockages. I have sat with my APPG co-chair, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), and the NHS chief pharmacist. We know that we need to unblock this. We need to believe that the NHS, free at the point of delivery, will deliver for these young families, and that the cheque book is not going to win.

I will raise money and crowdfund, because I will do anything I possibly can to help, but we should not have to do that. The medical evidence is there from other countries. We are going to have to make exceptions, as has been said, because this situation is different. We cannot put one of these children on a placebo, because we know that it will make them really ill when they withdraw from what they have already been given.

The children who have been given this product, and some adults, as in my constituent’s case, need to have confidence going forward. They do not need to beg, borrow and steal to get their lives back on track—and
they will not be put back on track fully, because this is not a cure, it just eliminates some symptoms for some people with some conditions. We really do not know the full position yet because, as the Minister has said, we have to do more work. However, in quite a lot of specific cases of paediatric epilepsy with seizures, it appears that cannabis oil makes a difference to the quality of people’s lives. We were sent here not to chat for the sake of it, but to make a difference to people’s lives, and I hope that is exactly what the Minister will do.

Finally, I will clearly not get another urgent question for a while, but Mr Speaker said to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that we will persist. He was referring to me, but I say that on behalf of the all-party group, which now has over 100 members. This is what this House is good at, and if we get it right we are very good at it. This has been an excellent debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House reaffirms its welcome for the change in the law that allows access to medical cannabis under prescription, but notes that only a handful of prescriptions for whole-plant-extract medical cannabis have been issued on the NHS, which has left a significant number of patients, many of whom are children with intractable epilepsy, with no access to medical cannabis and experiencing severe distress; and calls on the Government immediately to act to ensure that medical cannabis is available to appropriate patients and in particular to children suffering severe intractable epilepsy, such as Alfie Dingley whose plight and campaign did so much to secure the change in the law.
Billy McNeill MBE

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

8.35 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving the House the opportunity to pay tribute to, and mark the passing of, the great Billy McNeill, who died last month at the age of 79. We have plenty of time this evening and I will be as generous as the House requires in taking interventions. I am sure many will want to contribute. Billy McNeill is rightly considered one of the finest footballers of his generation. It is safe to say that what he achieved in his glittering, trophy-laden career will never be matched.

At the outset, I should declare a personal interest. First, my great, great grandfather, John O'Hara, was one of the founding fathers of Celtic football club back in 1888. Secondly, I am a very—I should stress the word very—minor shareholder in the club. Most importantly, like thousands of other wee boys growing up in Glasgow in the 1960s and 1970s, Billy McNeill was my hero. Who better was there for a wee boy to model himself on, or to aspire to become, than this tall, handsome, athletic, intelligent, articulate man, who was doing what every one of us dreamed of doing: playing for and captaining the football team that we loved?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I will. It would not be an Adjournment debate if the hon. Gentleman did not intervene.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I will make a bit of progress and come back to my hon. Friend—my hon. Friend—for that contribution. Nevertheless, I will come on to the nature of the team that won the European cup final in 1967 was also very—minor shareholder in the club. Most importantly, I am sure many will want to contribute. Billy McNeill is rightly considered one of the finest footballers of his generation. It is safe to say that what he achieved in his glittering, trophy-laden career will never be matched.

At the outset, I should declare a personal interest. First, my great, great grandfather, John O'Hara, was one of the founding fathers of Celtic football club back in 1888. Secondly, I am a very—I should stress the word very—minor shareholder in the club. Most importantly, like thousands of other wee boys growing up in Glasgow in the 1960s and 1970s, Billy McNeill was my hero. Who better was there for a wee boy to model himself on, or to aspire to become, than this tall, handsome, athletic, intelligent, articulate man, who was doing what every one of us dreamed of doing: playing for and captaining the football team that we loved?

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After he hung up his boots, Billy McNeill went on to enjoy a very successful career in football management with Clyde, Aberdeen, Manchester City, Aston Villa, and, very briefly, with Hibernian. Twice he managed his beloved Celtic, most notably steering them to a league and cup double in their centenary season of 1988.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): As a lifelong Manchester City fan, I am disappointed that I cannot be in Manchester tonight for the treble winners parade, but this gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to Billy McNeill for his time as manager of City. It was a tough gig being manager of City in the mid-80s, and we should not forget his achievements and the things he did for the club. He left in rather difficult circumstances—can the hon. Gentleman believe that he was frustrated because City had no money to build the team that he wanted? However, we should not forget that he stabilised our club and got us promoted back to the top flight. We wanted? However, we should not forget his achievements and the things he did for the club. He left in rather difficult circumstances—can the hon. Gentleman believe that he was frustrated because City had no money to build the team that he wanted? However, we should not forget that he stabilised our club and got us promoted back to the top flight. We remember him fondly at Manchester City as well.

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I will come later to that golden era of Scottish football. Understandably and probably rightly, Celtic pick up the credit and the limelight, but Scottish football fans in general had so much to celebrate in 1967.

I was lucky enough to meet Billy McNeill several times, both as a fan and latterly in a professional capacity. People say, “Never meet your heroes. You’ll only be left disappointed”, but when I met Billy McNeill nothing could have been further from the truth. One of the first times I met him was in Celtic’s centenary season of 1987–88. I had won first prize in a raffle—well, actually, not me but my mum won first prize, and I was sent to collect her star prize: a brand-new, all-singing, all-dancing colour telly. The second prize was a signed Celtic shirt and ball and the opportunity to watch a Celtic game from the Celtic Park directors box. Fortunately, I managed to persuade the organisers that, as the person who won the raffle, I should be given the choice of which prize to take. Safe to say, my mum never got her new telly.

My brother Diarmid and I got to Celtic Park, and what’s more Billy McNeill, then the manager, took us into the home dressing room an hour before kick-off to meet the players ahead of a crucial match against Aberdeen. It was a wonderful and remarkable gesture. Despite the importance of the fixture, he knew what it meant for fans like us to have this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be in the Celtic changing room before a big match. I am deeply honoured, therefore, that today, 32 years on, I can go some way to repay that kindness by leading the tributes to Billy McNeill on the Floor of the House of Commons.

Over the years, our paths crossed. When I was working as a TV producer-director, I had occasion to interview Billy McNeill as part of a number of documentaries I was working on. He would always make himself available and his interviews would invariably be thoughtful and considered, but they were also incredibly frustrating, because no matter how much I wanted him to talk about himself and his contribution he simply would not—or probably could not. All he could talk about was the contribution of those around him. An interview with Billy McNeill would be full of: “Yeah, that’s all well and good, but Jimmy Johnstone did that”, or, “Yes, if it hadn’t been for John Clark’s contribution, I’d have been nothing”, or, “That was Bobby Murdoch. What a player he was”. I am reminded of what Jock Stein said when someone asked him what made a great player: “the one who brings the best in others. When I am saying that I’m talking about Billy McNeill.”

To me, that sums up Billy McNeill. As I said, rarely, if ever, would he talk about how he felt, or give himself the praise that was absolutely his due.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and for securing the debate. He has been talking about Billy McNeill, the leader. Billy McNeill inspired confidence in the people around him. I remember, as a little boy, going with my dad to
see Celtic for the first time. It was 1 April 1969, and Celtic were playing St Johnstone at the old Muirton Park ground. My dad had taken me to see Celtic because, as a little boy from north-east Scotland, I had not had an opportunity to see them play before. My dad worked on Saturdays; he was a butcher. The score was 2-0 at half-time, to St Johnstone. I was quite fraught. I was eight, and my heroes were being beaten. My dad said, “Don’t worry about it, Stephen: they will come back in the second half and win 3-2”—and they did!

That inspirational feeling that Billy McNeill would generate was evidenced at the Scottish cup final in 1988, when Celtic won 2-1 against Dundee United. Mrs Thatcher presented the cup that day; it was a very memorable day.

Brendan O’Hara: And the hon. Gentleman had been doing so well! However, he is right to say that, particularly in that centenary season, there was an aura. There was something that we knew.

The hon. Gentleman will also recall the semi-final when Celtic were a goal down to Hearts and heading for injury time. Somehow we scored two during injury time, when Celtic were a goal down to Hearts and heading for injury time. Somehow we scored two during injury time, when Celtic were a goal down to Hearts and heading for injury time.

I was talking about Billy McNeil’s self-effacing character. I did once get him to talk about himself and how he felt. He was talking about the greatest moment of his career, when he went up to lift the European cup in Lisbon in 1967, but what he wanted to talk about was his regret at having to go alone. Because of the way in which the stadium was configured, all his team-mates were back in the dressing room, and he alone was taken across the pitch. What he wanted to talk about was how he led a team, yet he had been left to pick up Europe’s premier trophy on his own. That is the kind of player Billy McNeill was. That is the kind of captain Billy McNeill was. That is the kind of man Billy McNeill was.

Billy McNeill was born in Bellshill, Lanarkshire, on 2 March 1940. His dad, Jimmy, a Dundonian, was a career soldier who served 22 years with the Black Watch. His mum, Ellen, was the daughter of Lithuanian migrants, who, as Billy says in his autobiography, left Lithuania believing they were heading for the United States, only to be dumped on the docks of Leith by some unscrupulous sea captain. But my goodness, America’s loss was most certainly Scotland’s gain. Billy’s maternal grandparents gravitated towards Lanarkshire, where they settled, along with about 7,000 other Lithuanians who had gone there primarily to work in the coal mines.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this outside the Chamber, but I am proud to have a strong familial link with the legend Billy McNeill. My grandma, who was of Lithuanian descent, and Billy’s mum, who was known as Nellie, were close friends. Indeed, I understand that Nellie went out with my great-uncle Charlie before she married Billy’s dad. Great-uncle Charlie was a wonderful man. He was Labour to his core, he was Celtic, and, obviously, he was Lithuanian. As I am sure we will hear from my hon. Friend shortly, Bellshill was very proud, and should still be very proud, of perhaps its most famous son.

Brendan O’Hara: How different the course of history could have been had great-uncle Charlie managed to woo Nellie! On behalf of Celtic fans everywhere, I am very glad that he did not.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): As the MP for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, I know that Bellshill is already talking about erecting a statue to Billy McNeill to recognise the great man. I speak as someone who grew up in Lanarkshire; my brother was born in 1967 and his first words were “Celtic”. I also knew Jimmy Johnstone very well; I knew Jimmy all through his career and all through his life. I knew him through the pub, and through the pub I got to meet a lot of the Lisbon lions. It was an absolute pleasure and God rest them all.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. It shows that every one of us in Scotland seems to have just one, two or three degrees of separation; it is often said that it is the largest village in the world, and that is true.

I remember my dad telling a story. When Billy McNeill first signed for Celtic my dad was a sales rep and Billy worked in insurance and he used to meet Billy for coffee in the afternoon. Of course everybody claimed to know Billy McNeill and my dad used to tell the story that he was actually known not as Billy McNeill but as Willie McNeill. We never really believed this, but when he left Celtic to join Manchester City my dad wrote to him, “Dear Willie”, and got a letter back saying, “Dear Charlie, thank you for the letter, best regards, Willie.” So everybody seems to know everybody; the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Marion Fellows: The Lanarkshire connection continues; I give way to my hon. Friend.

Marion Fellows: I do not wish in any way to introduce a note of contention into this debate, but the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) should know that the Lithuanian club in Bellshill is in my constituency, and as Bill McNeill is half-Lithuanian I am claiming him.

Brendan O’Hara: I will leave Lanarkshire to decide which part is which.

Billy McNeill attended Our Lady’s High School in Motherwell and gained higher in English, Maths and Spanish and could easily have gone to university, but he also excelled on the football pitch and was being looked at by Arsenal, Manchester United, Newcastle, Clyde and Partick Thistle when, in 1957, he was selected to play for Scotland schools against England at Celtic Park. The match, which Scotland won 3-0, was watched by Jock Stein, who was then reserve team coach at Celtic. So impressed was he by what he saw that he persuaded the club to sign this young talent.

It would be lovely to be able to say “And the rest is history” or “It was plain sailing from then on,” but it was far from that, because ironically Billy McNeill’s arrival at Celtic Park coincided with one of the most dismal periods in the club’s history: “the wilderness years” during which not a single trophy was won in almost a decade and during which the club finished sixth, eighth and even ninth on one occasion in the old first division.
In addition, Jock Stein had left the club to become manager of Dunfermline, and Celtic appeared to be in an inescapable downward spiral. Billy too had plenty of opportunities to leave Celtic. In 1963, Bill Nicholson, the legendary boss of Tottenham Hotspur, offered to quadruple Billy’s wages if he would agree to move to White Hart Lane. Tempted as he was, he turned them down, such was his loyalty to Celtic.

He probably had occasion to regret that decision as the malaise at Celtic Park deepened in the 1960s. It was not until Jock Stein arrived back at Celtic Park in March 1965 that things begin to change, almost immediately, for the club and Billy personally. Within weeks of Stein’s arrival Celtic had won their first trophy in almost a decade. Billy McNeill’s late winner against Dunfermline in the 1965 Scottish cup final heralded a hitherto unimaginable period of domination of Scottish football by Celtic. My dad was lucky enough to be one of the 108,000 people packed inside Hampden that day to see history being made, as was, if I am not mistaken, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick); we had a conversation about this last week.

In the following season Celtic won their first Scottish league title in 11 years and qualified for the European cup for the first time. On their way to becoming the first team from these islands to be crowned champions of Europe, Celtic had to overcome the champions of Switzerland, France, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia before beating the mighty Inter Milan, champions of Italy, in the final itself. That a team of local boys—all born within 30 miles of Celtic Park, a team that cost just £30,000 to assemble, and a team led by the grandson of a Lithuanian miner—could achieve this is, quite simply, a fairy tale. And it is a fairy tale, I believe, that will endure for so long as there are people alive to talk about football.

That game in Lisbon was won by an 84th minute winner from Stevie Chalmers, to whom I should like to pay tribute. He sadly died just a few days after the passing of Billy McNeill. He was a marvellous player for Celtic and Scotland and, as I have said, he scored the most important goal in the history of Celtic football club that day in Lisbon. For Celtic fans, whether they were there or not—indeed, whether they were born or not—that afternoon has left an indelible mark. Indeed, I cannot remember a time in my life when I could not rhyme off that team: Simpson, Craig, Gemmill, Murdoch, McNeill, Clark, Johnstone, Wallace, Chalmers, Auld and Lennox.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, as I grew up in a family of Celtic fanatics, we would inevitably talk football when the family gathered together. Years after Lisbon, the stories would be told again and again. Interestingly, however, the most oft-repeated tale was not about Lisbon itself. In our family, the most revered tale was that of Billy McNeill’s last-minute winner against the Yugoslav champions Vojvodina in the quarter-final. Having pulled back a one-goal deficit from the first leg, thanks to yet another Stevie Chalmers goal, a place in the semi-final of the European cup looked certain to be decided by a play-off in Rotterdam. With the game in injury time, Celtic won a corner. As he did so often, Billy McNeill rose up above everyone—indeed, some say that he hung in the air for an extraordinary length of time—to head home that vital goal. For those who were at Celtic Park that night, the image of Billy McNeill’s winning goal is probably the most enduring moment of their Celtic-supporting lives. In the decades that followed, no Christmas, new year, wedding, first communion or family funeral could pass without my dad and my uncles reliving or—depending on how much whisky had been consumed—actually attempting to re-enact that goal.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I want to thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and to let him know that my uncle, Owen McNally, played for Celtic and scored eight goals in one game in 1927. We still have the ball in the house; it is still inflated and still has its laces. Most significantly, however, my next-door neighbour Willie Garner was signed by Celtic from Aberdeen and he scored two goals for Celtic against the opposition. I think that might have been his second-last game. He was signed by the great Billy McNeill, and he remains with us and still admires Billy McNeill to this day. I, too, was at the game against Vojvodina, and those memories will never, ever leave me.


As we said earlier, the late 1960s were undoubtedly the golden era of Scottish football. As well as Celtic’s European triumph, I think everyone agrees that Scotland replaced England as world champions when they beat them 3-2 at Wembley. Rangers came within a whisker of making Glasgow the first city in Europe to be home to both of the continent’s premier trophies when they lost out in the final of the European cup winner’s cup to Bayern Munich in extra time. Kilmarnock also reached the semi-final of the Fairs cup that season. Of course, Kilmarnock FC are now back in Europe for the first time in 53 years, and I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in congratulating the team, and also my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on actually making it to his work today.

It can never be underestimated just how important Celtic’s victory and Scotland’s contribution to world football were. Despite everything that Scottish football had achieved, however, much of Europe was still unconvinced and regarded Celtic’s European cup success as a flash in the pan. Even before Billy McNeill had paraded the European cup in Glasgow, the detractors were at work. Claims from Italy and Spain that Celtic’s triumph was a fluke began to circulate, with the Spanish press saying that the European cup belonged in Madrid and that Real, who had narrowly lost out to Inter Milan in the semi-final, were really the best team in Europe.

To prove the point, and to honour the legendary Alfredo Di Stéfano, Real Madrid invited Celtic to play a challenge match at the Bernabéu in June 1967 at which, in front of 120,000 adoring fans, Real Madrid would put the Scottish upstarts firmly in their place. Billy McNeill’s Celtic had other ideas during the match, played with the intensity of a cup final, and the visitors emerged as worthy winners thanks to a Bobby Lennox goal, confirming once and for all that they were indeed the best football team in Europe. Even the Spanish press grudgingly agreed, with MARCA declaring the following morning:

“May the football which Celtic play stay among us.”
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a simply fantastic speech, although those of us who are not Celtic fans will have been shocked by the number of late goals that he has recounted. It seems that nothing changes.

To bring that Spanish reference forward to the present day, it speaks to the warmth with which Billy McNeill is regarded that Athletic Bilbao, a club with which neither Billy nor Celtic has any real connection, awarded Billy McNeill its annual “One Club Man” award just three weeks after he died in a touching ceremony at the club’s stadium in the Basque region. Does that not speak volumes about the man’s character?

Brendan O’Hara: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. We were all surprised and delighted that Athletic Bilbao recognised Billy McNeill’s achievement in that way.

It is of course undeniable that Celtic were the first UK team to lift Europe’s premier trophy, but it was about much more than that. Celtic under Billy McNeill’s captaincy were the first winners of the European cup to come from outside the European football giants of Spain, Portugal or Italy. In the preceding 11 years of the competition, it had only ever been won by Real Madrid, Benfica, AC Milan and Inter Milan. Celtic, led by Billy McNeill, played football that ushered in a new free-flowing attacking style, which was the antithesis of the stifling catenaccio or “door-bolt” system that was so successfully employed by the Italians throughout the 1960s. That free-flowing, attacking football exemplified by Celtic in 1967 was taken on by the Dutch, the Germans and the English clubs that dominated the competition for the next two decades.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I watched the 1967 European cup final with my late father, who knew a thing or two about football, and my brother, who kept a diary, and the entry for that day says: “I don’t remember watching my dad enjoy a game of football so much as he did today.” My dad was obviously a hoops man through and through, but his hoops were Greenock Morton.

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend downplays the fact that his dad was a hugely accomplished professional footballer for Greenock Morton.

As I said earlier, my dad was present at Hampden in 1965 to see the start of the all-conquering McNeill era. In 1975, I was lucky enough to be at Hampden to see the last of his 822 appearances, when Celtic beat Airdrie in the Scottish cup final. On Saturday, a whole new generation of O’Haras and I will be back at Hampden, in the Scottish cup final. On Saturday, a whole new generation of O’Haras and I will be back at Hampden.

Following the match, Billy announced his retirement to the Scottish cup final of 3 May 1975 when, unfortunately, Celtic defeated the Diamonds 3-1 at Hampden Park. Following the match, Billy announced his retirement from playing football. It was his 822nd and last appearance for Celtic. Remarkably, in a career spanning so many years, he was never substituted, which is a tremendous achievement for any player. I cannot recall any other player who made that many appearances without being substituted.

As my hon. Friend outlined, Billy went on to have a career in management, with spells at Clyde, Aberdeen, Manchester City, Aston Villa, Hibs and, of course, two spells at the helm of his beloved Hoops. Both on and off the park, Billy made an enormous contribution to the beautiful game, so it is right that so many people from all across the footballing community came together to mourn his passing and remember his life.

Finally, our condolences go to Billy’s wife Liz, to his children Susan, Carol, Libby, Paula and Martyn and to his eight grandchildren. Scottish football has lost one of its very, very best, because Billy McNeill was not only a lion of a footballer but also a giant of a man.

9.9 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As the Member with the privilege of representing Celtic Park, I rise to echo the tribute paid to the late, great Billy McNeill by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), whom I congratulate most sincerely on securing this debate.

For some bizarre reason, there is a strange irony whereby many Scottish MPs do not, in fact, support the club based in their constituency, but I would argue that we are all the richer for that. I declare openly, and perhaps confess, that I am an Airdrieonian supporter. I will return to Billy McNeill’s link to Airdrie in a few moments.

Since being elected as the Member for the east end of Glasgow, I am proud to have had a good relationship with Celtic football club, which is a massive, iconic part of the east end. For those driving along London Road, that towering statue, produced by John McKenna, of Billy holding the European cup aloft is quite a sight to behold, particularly with the thousands of green and white scarves attached to it over the past few weeks.

Following Billy McNeill’s sad passing, it is hard to describe how much of an impact his death and, most importantly, his life have had throughout the city of Glasgow, regardless of people’s age or even which football club they support. As my hon. Friend has already outlined, Billy McNeill will be forever known in history as the first player from these islands to lift the European cup when Celtic triumphed in Lisbon back in 1967.

I would have expected nothing less, but my hon. Friend paid a typically warm and thoughtful tribute to the career and life of Billy McNeill, so I do not intend to repeat much of that. However, when he informed me that he had secured this evening’s debate, he told me—tongue in cheek, I am sure—that I am not allowed to mention Airdrie, a hurdle at which I fell just two paragraphs into my speech.

The link between Billy and Airdrieonians goes back to the Scottish cup final of 3 May 1975 when, unfortunately, Celtic defeated the Diamonds 3-1 at Hampden Park. Following the match, Billy announced his retirement from playing football. It was his 822nd and last appearance for Celtic. Remarkably, in a career spanning so many years, he was never substituted, which is a tremendous achievement for any player. I cannot recall any other player who made that many appearances without being substituted.

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And it is not just people of Billy’s generation who wish to mark a life well lived. On Saturday morning, I was at Our Lady of Peace in Barlanark to cheer on St Francis of Assisi Primary School, which went on to
win the Billy McNeill memorial cup. It is fitting that the cup was won and retained by a team from the east end of Glasgow. Many of the boys and girls who were playing recognised Billy McNeill’s contribution and seek to emulate it in the years to come.

Tonight, though, has been a fitting tribute to a man who entertained so many and brought so much happiness, as we have heard, particularly to those dearest to him. He will, of course, be sorely missed, but his contribution will never be forgotten, and I am glad that we have had the opportunity tonight to immortalise him in the Chamber and in *Hansard*. For that, I thank my hon. Friend most sincerely.

9.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for that passionate and moving introduction. I feel his speech may have been written a long time ago, ready to be brought out of the cupboard to pay tribute to his beloved team. Never have I met such a happy minor shareholder, which is a rarity. The wonderful, moving and passionate remarks of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and all the interventions are greatly welcomed.

I feel honoured and privileged to respond and pay my own short tribute to Billy McNeill MBE. I remember hearing the sadness in Nicky Campbell’s voice on Radio 5 Live as he announced Billy’s passing and what it meant to him as a Scottish football fan.

At the same time as paying tribute to Billy, we must pay tribute to Stevie Chalmers, who also sadly passed away recently. Stevie, as we have heard, is another great of Scottish football and will always be remembered as the man who scored the winning goal, never to be forgotten, in that final in Lisbon in 1967. Their importance to the history of Scottish football has been underlined rightly by the First Minister of Scotland sending her condolences to both Mr McNeill’s family and to Mr Chalmers’ family.

I would like to use this opportunity to send my best wishes to the families and to pay tribute, on behalf of Members on both sides of the House. In her letter, the First Minister described Mr McNeill as a “legend of the game”. As we have heard, the word “legend” should rightly be reserved for someone who has achieved incredible feats, and there is no argument about the fact that Billy McNeill is not only in this category, but was one of the giants of football. He will be remembered as the first British player to win the European cup. Leading Celtic, he paved the way, showing it was possible to not only compete, but beat the biggest and best in Europe at football.

He was truly inspirational, and as we saw, this inspiration spread, with Manchester United, under Sir Matt Busby, following Celtic’s lead and winning the European cup the very next year. Liverpool, Aston Villa, Nottingham Forest and Aberdeen, under another great Scot, Sir Alex Ferguson, and so many of our other clubs, continued to win European trophies in the 1970s and 1980s because of that paving of the way.

As in 1967, we are again celebrating unprecedented British success in European football this season, with the top two European competitions—with new names and different connotations—being exclusively British. On behalf of the Government, my best wishes go to Liverpool, Arsenal, Tottenham and Chelsea. As tonight shows, we know that European finals are where football legends are truly made, so we have much to look forward to.

When Billy McNeill captained his Celtic team to European glory in 1967, he etched the club’s name in history and made heroes of every player. The “Lions of Lisbon” have left a legacy and will be celebrated forever. We have rightly been reminded that Billy led Celtic during their most successful domestic period in history, with nine successive league titles and numerous cup wins. There is a great similarity with Celtic’s current achievement, with the club having just clinched its eighth consecutive league title and being on course for its third consecutive domestic treble. We of course wish both Celtic and Hearts the very best of luck in Saturday’s Scottish FA cup final—I see some pain etched on some faces.

In modern football, we are full of praise for how Manchester City have managed to defend their title this year, but the achievement of Celtic during the ’60s and ’70s was incredible, particularly given how strong Scottish football was in that period. It was as strong as it ever has been then. As we have heard, not only did Billy’s achievements as a player etch his name into the club’s history, but he then returned to the club as a manager, winning more trophies and truly cementing his place further in the hearts and minds of this mighty club and its great supporters for ever more.

Billy may have been described this evening as a “one-club man”, but some people might disagree; we must not forget his important management of Manchester City, Aston Villa, Clyde and Aberdeen, and those clubs and fans will rightly remember him fondly. He was, by all accounts, a humble man, a caring man and a gentleman. He was a true ambassador for the club and for the whole of Scottish football. Sport provides us with incredible leaders who transcend their achievements on the field and become part of our national memories. My dad would have felt the same about Denis Compton, and I feel the same about Ian Wright and Paula Radcliffe, to name but a few.

It is so important, as we come up to this summer, to look at the opportunity to find our new sporting stars, those who will have the chance to leave their mark and inspire the nation during an amazing summer of sport. Just this weekend, we hosted the taekwondo world championships in Manchester—I was there for the launch. Liverpool will play host to the netball world cup, and we will shortly be enjoying the cricket world cup throughout the country. These events could be the benchmarks for truly inspirational careers for a whole host of the world’s finest sportspeople, once again providing legacies for years to come.

Celtic’s current manager, Neil Lennon, summed up the mood perfectly when he said:

“I love Billy’s statue, which is the first thing you see whenever you walk up The Celtic Way. It’s the perfect image of him, holding aloft the European Cup, and it will remind future generations of supporters of what a great Celtic man he was.”

I am sure everyone in the Chamber will agree that we hope that Scottish football can truly return to such levels of European success—or even to success at the international level, with Steve Clarke’s appointment
today as new team manager. Why not? The Scottish women have been leading the way, and they will play England in the world cup this summer, and of course Members from all parties will be joining in the support over in France. I am very much looking forward to that. The game of football remains absolutely as popular as it ever has been. It is full of people who are passionate and knowledgeable about clubs around the world. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) reminded me just last week, it is clear that there is much more to come from Scottish football, both men’s and women’s.

Let me sign off, as I started, by thanking the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute and everyone in the Chamber for affording us the chance to spend a little time rightly celebrating the lives of not one but two of Scotland’s greatest footballing heroes. Billy McNeill and Stevie Chalmers serve as great examples of the huge impact that good footballers can have on their club, their communities and their nation. Football is the people’s game, and let us rejoice in the fact that, unlike in other areas and facets of life in which, frankly, we cannot always come together, football allows us to share that passion and those magical moments and gives us memories that truly can last a lifetime, as we have heard this evening.

I have outlined some of the reasons why the Government rightly continue, and must continue, to develop and support new facilities and community programmes to encourage people of all ages to take up our national sport and to make sure that future generations can emulate their heroes and experience the sheer joy of football. Billy McNeill MBE and Stevie Chalmers, with his 236 goals, have rightly been remembered in the Chamber this evening for their achievements and the legacies they created and for reminding us of what is possible if we believe and come together.

Question put and agreed to.

9.22 pm

House adjourned.
Mel Stride: The loan charge is not retrospective. There has never been a time in the history of our country when the arrangements that I described a moment ago were ever compliant with our tax code. Of course, the loans, which there is no intention of ever repaying—they are simply there to avoid national insurance and income tax—persist into the present. Generous “time to pay” arrangements are available with HMRC. I urge anybody who is involved in avoidance of this kind to talk to HMRC and come to sensible arrangements.

Mr Lewis: Is the Minister not aware that the people affected by this charge are strivers and people who are just about managing? They are the people who are suffering as a consequence of this decision. How many times are the Government going to hit ordinary working people, including groups like the Women Against State Pension Inequality, without Ministers fulfilling their responsibilities, intervening in such circumstances and ensuring that common sense prevails?

Mel Stride: If we include the loans, the average earnings of those who have been involved in this egregious tax avoidance is twice our country’s national average wage. There is no need for people to get involved in these schemes, the sole purpose of which is to avoid tax. Some Members have raised amounts of some £700,000 or £900,000 that HMRC is pursuing in this context; that would equate to a couple of million pounds going through these schemes. I remind the House that these are schemes that take loans from the UK out to an offshore trust in a low or no-tax jurisdiction and route it back into the UK as a loan that is never due to be repaid, simply for the purpose of avoiding tax. We do not believe that is right.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): If the Minister is right when he says that the loan charge is not retrospective, how come we have examples like the situation faced by my constituent, who was pursued with an accelerated payment notice back in 2015, in relation to a loan charge scheme? He paid the amount that HMRC asked him for, but now suddenly, out of the blue, a request has been sent to a wrong email address that means he will probably have to pay more money. Does that not show that HMRC has shifted the goalposts and therefore that the loan charge is retrospective?

Mel Stride: I entirely stand by my earlier remarks about the measures not being in the least retrospective. Of course, I cannot comment on the tax affairs of the individual that my right hon. Friend has just referred to; it would not be right or proper of me to do so.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I have received increasingly distressed representations from constituents affected by the loan charge. One of their concerns is that in making any settlement with HMRC, they risk giving up their right to review in the event of any subsequent change in Government policy. Will the Minister advise my constituents on what they might do?
They currently feel trapped between that prospect and the risk of further financial penalty from HMRC if they do not come to an agreement quickly.

**Mel Stride:** I have made it very clear, as have the Government, over a long period of time—at least since 2016 when these measures were first brought into effect, which is before I arrived in my current position—that our policy is our policy and that we will not change that policy. For those who have been involved in this form of aggressive and contrived tax avoidance, the recommendation is very clear: the best thing to do is to speak to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and come to a sensible and reasonable arrangement for repayment.

**Joseph Johnson** (Orpington) (Con): I understand the Minister’s sincere desire to tackle disguised remuneration and thank him for always being available to discuss my constituents’ concerns. However, something has clearly gone very wrong with the operation of the loan charge and now, too, I fear with the roll-out of IR35 to the private sector. Will the Minister commit please to pause both the loan charge and the roll-out of IR35 to the private sector until my constituents’ concerns have been fully addressed?

**Mel Stride:** IR35 is often raised in the context of the loan charge, but it is a completely unrelated matter. IR35 is about making sure that those who are effectively employed by other businesses are treated as employees for tax purposes, and that is only right and proper. The loan charge is about putting right the situation of this aggressive tax avoidance.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Given that nurses and cleaners—the lower-paid—can be adversely affected by this and distinguished from those who are deliberately tax avoiding, will the Minister not agree at least to extend the payback period rather than people having to go through the rigmarole with the tax man?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which is that, when it comes to paying the money that is due, HMRC has a duty to be proportionate and to make sure that appropriate arrangements are in place. There is no maximum limit for the time over which repayments can occur—there are often arrangements that come into place that are well in excess of 10 years. HMRC will continue to approach these matters on that basis.

**Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): May I also thank the Minister for the way that he is engaging on this issue? Although I certainly do agree that anybody who has tried to avoid tax in this way needs to be held accountable, I do ask whether it is right that HMRC can go back 20 years to reopen accounts that were accepted. If this tax was due then, why did HMRC not obtain that tax then? Why did it not charge it then? Why has it taken it 20 years to get to this point?

**Mel Stride:** I have already dealt with the issue of retrospection. As to why tax may not have been paid at the time that it was due, there are a multitude of reasons for that not least of which is the fact that many taxpayers simply do not volunteer the correct information or they claim that their scheme works when clearly it does not. HMRC has, over many, many years, pursued these various schemes through the courts, including the Supreme Court, and on each occasion, these schemes have been found not to work.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Treasury has claimed that the off-payroll tax should not affect the genuine self-employed, yet HMRC’s Check Employment Status tool for tax tool assessed 3,909 contractors across five key public sector bodies and the results were that 94% of the contractors were deemed to be employers. That clearly demonstrates that the CEST tool is leading to the wrong decisions. Will the Minister now agree to cease the use of the CEST tool and to put on hold those plans to roll it out to the private sector?

**Mel Stride:** The statement that the hon. Gentleman has made does not suggest that the CEST tool is inappropriate. The CEST tool is there to determine an individual’s employment status. In 85% of cases, it does give a determination. HMRC will stand by that determination provided the right data was put into the CEST process.

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): Following a recent case, an individual convicted of benefit fraud was given 900 years to pay off the £88,000 that they had defrauded from the state, but those facing the loan charge have not committed any criminal offence or broken the law, yet they are being hounded by HMRC for unaffordable sums. Can my right hon. Friend please advise me on why HMRC is persecuting innocent people to the point that it is affecting their mental and emotional wellbeing while allowing convicted fraudsters such leeway?

**Mel Stride:** HMRC is not persecuting people, as my hon. Friend suggests. It is collecting the tax that is due. It is also not pursuing people for criminal activities, as he says. However, when it comes to criminality, I can tell the House that very recently, on 16 May, HMRC announced that six promoters of these schemes had been arrested on suspicion of loan charge tax fraud.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Those of us on the Labour Benches have repeatedly asked the Government what they are doing to clamp down on the enablers of the loan charge and we have repeatedly received feeble answers showing inertia and inaction, and we have had more of that today. More broadly, why are the Government not doing more to crack down on lawyers, accountants and others aiding and abetting tax avoidance under the guise of legitimate tax planning?

**Mel Stride:** I think the hon. Gentleman probably composed his question before he heard my last answer, in which I made it clear that we have just recently had six arrests relating to the suspected fraudulent activity around the loan charge. We are also actively pursuing 100 promoters of tax avoidance schemes, including those relating to the loan charge, and have brought in up to £1 million fines for promoters engaged in this activity.

**Peter Dowd:** Six? There are thousands of these wheezes going on out there. Let me give the Minister another example. Under existing tax compliance and procurement rules, and public contracts regulations, there is provision...
for public contracts to be denied to individuals and organisations that do not comply with tax law, possibly including these promoters of loan schemes. Can the Financial Secretary admit that there is evidence of tax avoidance and enabling by organisations winning public contracts while not one single individual or organisation has been banned from securing those public contracts?

Mel Stride: Is not the difference between the Government and the Opposition on tax avoidance quite simply that this Government are serious about it, having brought in sufficient funds to employ every policeman and woman last Labour Government, we would be deprived of and protected £200 billion since 2010? The tax gap is at this Government are serious about it, having brought in and the Opposition on tax avoidance quite simply that has been banned from securing those public contracts? Can the Financial Secretary admit that there is evidence of tax avoidance and enabling by organisations winning public contracts while not one single individual or organisation

Local Authority Budgets

3. Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the fiscal effect of the no recourse to public funds condition on local authority budgets. [911003]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I have regular discussions with the Home Secretary and the Local Government Secretary about their budgets and how they are best managed.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister at least acknowledge that there is a problem? London boroughs are spending about £50 million a year—which they have to spend, but usually under the Children Act 1989—on families in extremis with no recourse to public funds. Will she acknowledge that that is the case and look at how local authorities are funded?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that the spending review is coming up. If there is a specific issue with London local authorities or other local authorities, I would expect that issue to be raised by the Local Government Secretary, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to meet him to discuss the issue.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One specific issue in relation to the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham is the reopening of Hammersmith bridge. It is about time that the council got on with repairing and reopening the bridge. The council has a very good financial settlement. Will the Chief Secretary join me in knocking heads together between the council and Sadiq Khan’s Transport for London to get the bridge open?

Elizabeth Truss: I welcome my right hon. Friend. Friend’s efforts to build bridges across London and to improve London’s infrastructure. The London mayoral elections are coming up, and I suggest that people vote for somebody who is going to make change happen much quicker.

Seema Malhotra (Fulham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister commit to ensuring that survivors of domestic abuse with insecure immigration status have safe and confidential reporting systems, without fear of being returned to their country of origin?

Mr Speaker: The question is actually about the fiscal effects of the no recourse to public funds condition. I think I know what the hon. Lady is driving at, but I hope that other people are as aware of the connection as I am.

Elizabeth Truss: I have to agree, Mr Speaker; I am slightly struggling with the link between fiscal policy and the hon. Lady’s question. However, she might be interested to know that in the spending review we are specifically looking at how we can help women suffering domestic violence and how we can take the matter into account when deciding the future of our public spending.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It was great to see the Minister on the Isle of Wight the week before last, although I am sad to say that there are not too many double entendres on her social media. She will be aware that I have written her a letter, asking her to ensure that the Isle of Wight becomes a pilot scheme in order for us to look at how we can better integrate Government services in the One Public Estate programme.

Elizabeth Truss: It was certainly a weekend to remember on the Isle of Wight. It was my first ever visit to that great place, and I was impressed. The Isle of Wight provides a good opportunity to look at how we can do things differently, including how we can integrate services to cut down on bureaucracy and put more money on the frontline.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the people of the Isle of Wight were most gratified that the right hon. Lady was among their number, even if only for a relatively short period.

NHS Pension Scheme

4. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the annual tapered allowance on members of the NHS pension fund. [911004]

5. Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the annual tapered allowance on the (a) recruitment and (b) retention of doctors in (i) hospitals, (ii) primary care and (iii) the armed forces. [911005]

6. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the NHS pension scheme tapered annual allowance. [911006]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The NHS pension scheme and other public service schemes are among the most generous pension schemes available in this country today. The tapered annual allowance is focused on the highest-earning pension savers to ensure that the tax relief that they receive is not disproportionate to that of other savers. However, I do accept that there is some evidence that the annual allowance charge is having an impact on the retention of high-earning clinicians in the NHS. I am in discussion with my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary about how to provide additional pension flexibility for NHS doctors affected by the annual allowance tax charge, and he will make an announcement as soon as possible.
Paul Masterton: I am grateful to the Chancellor for that answer, and particularly to the Government for accepting that the taper contributes to capacity gaps and retention issues in the NHS. Given that the costs of increased waiting times, delayed diagnosis and knowledge gaps far outweigh the tax revenue generated, would not the sensible and fiscally responsible thing be just to scrap the taper altogether?

Mr Hammond: I understand my hon. Friend’s point. However, the overall reforms to pensions allowances that were made in the previous two Parliaments and include the tapered annual allowance are necessary to deliver a fair system and to protect the public finances. These measures affect only the highest-earning pension savers and are expected to raise £6 billion a year. But, as I said, we are monitoring the response of high earners in the NHS, and I expect that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will be able to make an announcement soon.

Ruth Jones: A number of hospital consultants who live in my constituency have written to me to express their concern at the implications of the tapered annual allowance. With GP numbers continuing to fall, ongoing shortages across consultant specialties and armed forces doctors currently experiencing a 23% workforce shortfall, how is the Chancellor going to help doctors and patients by resolving the unintended consequences caused by the annual tapered allowance and lifetime annual allowance that are leading to doctors who would otherwise be happily continuing to work having to leave the profession to avoid disproportionate and unfair tax bills?

Mr Hammond: I think I have answered that question, but it is good to hear Labour MPs focusing on the disincentive effect of high taxation, particularly on professionals in our public services. Someone has to be earning £150,000 a year before the tapered annual allowance affects them. I would suggest that perhaps Labour Members who do understand the detrimental effect of very high marginal tax rates on professionals in our public services make those representations to their right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, who is intending to raise tax for everybody earning more than £80,000 a year.

David Linden: One of the constituents I have in Barrack Hill is a consultant who has told me that there are concerns about recruitment and retention. Given that a recent survey shows that 40% of doctors have retired early as a result of pension tax changes, I would urge the Chancellor to look again at this and make as strong a case as possible to the Health Secretary so that he can make sure that we have the staff in the NHS to serve our communities.

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, both the Treasury and the Health Department wish to address this problem. We have to find a mechanism that does it in a way that is fair and appropriate. The right way to do it is through increasing flexibilities within the NHS and, potentially, other public sector schemes. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will make an announcement as soon as possible.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Yesterday I met representatives of Alliance Health Group who were making representations because a number of very experienced surgeons are leaving the NHS due to the problems with the pension. I just wondered how representations would have been made to the Treasury on behalf of consultant groups.

Mr Hammond: The British Medical Association has been vocal, I think is probably the right word, in making the case around the disincentive effect of annual allowance charges, in particular, but also lifetime allowance charges. The Health Secretary and I have been discussing this for some time, and I think we are close to reaching a conclusion.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): The workforce shortfall is the greatest challenge facing the NHS. What discussions has the Chancellor had with the Health Secretary about the combined impact of these changes together with the disastrous consequences for the NHS workforce that would follow a no-deal or WTO Brexit?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Lady says, recruitment and retention is one of the big challenges facing the NHS. Clearly, anything that was to impede the NHS’s access to overseas workers coming into the UK to serve in our health service would have an impact on that. But I have also recognised and acknowledged today that the operation of the pension annual allowance charge does have a significant effect—particularly, it seems, on partners in GP practices.

Child Poverty

7. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to tackle child poverty. [911007]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government take child poverty extremely seriously and are committed to ensuring that all children have the best life chances. The Government believe that moving into work and progressing in work is the best and most sustainable route out of child poverty, and we have reformed the welfare system to ensure that work pays and working families can keep more of what they earn.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I despair at that predictable answer. There are 1.7 million children in destitution. Reports of children arriving at school hungry, scouring bins and stealing food from dinner halls are commonplace. Child poverty has risen by over half a million since 2010. Yesterday the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty was joined by Human Rights Watch in making it very clear that this Government’s relentless austerity measures and cruel welfare reforms are to blame for growing levels of hunger and poverty. Does the Minister agree with those internationally respected organisations?

John Glen: No, I do not. I do recognise the diverse needs across this country. When I served with the hon. Lady on the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty and visited South Shields, I acknowledged that there are significant challenges. That is why I am very pleased to see that the employment rate in her constituency is up 20% since 2010.
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister and the Chancellor have had a chance to read the west midlands local industrial strategy, drawn up by the Business Secretary and the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street. Is the Minister aware that youth unemployment has reduced by some 50% over the last few years in the west midlands? Is that not a way to take children out of poverty?

John Glen: It is well known that Andy Street has done a phenomenal amount to invest in the right sort of infrastructure and transform the life chances of many people across his region, and he deserves credit across the House for what he has achieved.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): While there are only 300 people registered as unemployed in my constituency, there are nearly 2,500 children living below the poverty line, which tells us that living in a workless household is not the principal or only cause of poverty; low wages are also a cause. Will the Chancellor urgently review the living wage, so that it actually becomes a living wage, rather than giving it an inaccurate label intended only to ease the consciences of the comfortable?

John Glen: The national living wage has gone up to £8.21 an hour. The Government’s aspiration is to allow it to rise to 60% of median earnings. It is important to acknowledge that in 2010 take-home pay was £9,200 after national insurance and tax. For someone working full time on the national living wage, that figure is now £4,500 more, at £13,700.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, the Child Poverty Action Group said of the two-child cap: “You could not design a better policy to increase child poverty than this one”. Will the Minister use the spending review to ditch that policy?

John Glen: We spend £95 billion on working-age benefits, hardship payments, benefit advances and budgeting loans. Obviously all matters are under review in the context of spending decisions, which will be made clear in the autumn Budget.

Kirsty Blackman: That is not good enough. Analysis by Cambridge Econometrics states: “In all of the Brexit scenarios, real wages for low-pay workers are depressed due to increases in prices and reduced levels of productivity, due to skills shortages and lower industry investment.” Faced with this child poverty double-whammy, does the Minister agree that it is no surprise that the Tories are set for an absolute drubbing on Thursday?

John Glen: I listen to the Office for Budget Responsibility, which is forecasting sustained real-wage growth for every one of the next five years. The latest statistics capture household income up to April 2018, but since then we have had a year of real-wage growth.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Child poverty has now reached such an unconscionable level that Members are right to highlight that, this week, the Government were condemned by Human Rights Watch for pursuing what it called “cruel and harmful policies”. Whether or not the Government accept that, the reality is that 4 million British children now live in poverty, that that figure has grown by 500,000 in the last five years and that the majority of those children have parents who are in work. Let me ask the Government: if they do not accept that Conservative policies are creating this crisis, what do Ministers believe is responsible for this humanitarian disaster?

John Glen: What is important is that this Government continue to focus on creating jobs, and allowing families to experience the value of such a job and receiving more money in their household take-home pay, and that is what we will continue to focus on.

Supporting the High Street

8. Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What fiscal steps is he taking to support the high street. [911009]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): High streets are at the heart of our communities, and they serve a social as well as an economic purpose. To support them, at Budget 2018 I cut business rates for small and medium-sized retail premises operated by independent retailers by a third for two years from April 2019, saving businesses over £1 billion. We have also set up a £675 million future high streets fund.

Mr Dunne: I very much welcome those measures in last year’s Budget, but for this coming comprehensive spending review, will my right hon. Friend consider offering occupiers of listed premises in town centres with freehold or full repairing lease obligations a VAT exemption on repairs and maintenance of those premises, which is a cost they have to bear but their online competitors and other retailers outside high streets do not?

Mr Hammond: I have to say to my right hon. Friend that, under EU law, we cannot introduce a reduced rate of VAT that is limited to repairs, maintenance and renovation of listed buildings. In any case, VAT incurred on their properties by VAT-registered businesses may be recoverable from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, subject to the normal VAT recovery rules. However, the good news is that we remain committed to supporting our high streets, and on Saturday we announced a £62 million fund to breathe new life into historic buildings on heritage high streets, which I hope will go some way to helping.
Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree with me that companies such as St Modwen that buy up town centres such as Kirkby in my constituency do nothing with them—in fact, they leave them to rot—and then simply sell them on to a pension fund? Is that the way we want to run the future of our town centres, and has he not got anything more imaginative that can be done about it?

Mr Hammond: The £675 million fund that I mentioned is specifically intended to allow local authorities to develop plans for responding to the transformation of the high street that is coming. Retailing is changing, and high streets have to change to reflect that. We cannot hold that tide back, but we can help to support the transition.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Boots the Chemist, one of the most popular high street stores, says that just 22 of its 2,400 stores qualify for the Chancellor’s excellent business rates reduction scheme—not because of anything the Chancellor has done, but because of EU state aid rules. What can the Chancellor do to assist and to get around those rules?

Mr Hammond: I am a little mystified by this story about Boots, which I too read in the newspapers. When I announced the policy, I said that it was designed to help small independent retailers, and Boots, with 22,000 providers, does not fall within my definition of a small independent retailer. We always understood that this policy initiative was designed to support small independent retailers as they transition to the high street of the future.

Mr Speaker: I call Anneliese Dodds. [Interruption.] No! I had the distinct impression that the hon. Lady wished to come in on this question, but it is not obligatory.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On the next one I believe, Mr Speaker; I am terribly sorry.

Mr Speaker: On Mr Brake’s question—oh, very sorry. We do not want unwelcome contributors. The hon. Lady can choose her own destiny, and we are grateful to her.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last Friday, I met members of the Chamber of Trade at Newtownards. Of three small shops in the town of Ards, one started off employing 10 and now employs 60, one started off employing six and now employs 30, and one started off employing 10 and now employs 60. Would the Chancellor consider rates reduction for those high street shops that increase employment?

Mr Hammond: As far as I am aware, rates is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland; it is a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, which I very much hope will be back in operation very soon.

Climate Change

9. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of Government funding to mitigate climate change.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have a proud record as a nation, reducing carbon emissions faster than any other G7 country since 2000. We have done that with a combination of spending measures and market mechanisms.

Tom Brake: The Liberal Democrats were the first major political party to call for a zero-carbon Britain. We believe that target must be met by 2045. What assessment have the Government made of the climate change mitigation costs that would be incurred by 2045, of the support that would be needed for businesses to help them achieve a zero-carbon Britain by 2045, and of the health and environmental benefits?

Elizabeth Truss: We are currently assessing the report of the Climate Change Committee on this subject. No doubt the right hon. Gentleman is a regular reader of the Treasury Green Book on the way we assess investments. Last year, in the new Green Book, we specifically included looking at natural capital as a way of making that assessment. That is one of the lenses through which we shall be looking at the spending review.

19. [911020] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Climate change is increasing the risk of flooding, and despite devastating floods in my constituency in 2015, the Government have not yet committed funding for the one-in-200-year scheme that the Chief Secretary knows is needed to protect businesses in Kirkstall in my constituency. The gap now is just £23 million, so will the Government make it a priority in the comprehensive spending review, even if that spending review is just for one year?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady that Leeds does need flood protection. I remember visiting with her a few years ago to see the scheme. We have already achieved phase 1 with the £32 million for that, and the Government are putting forward £65 million for phase 2. My understanding is that Leeds City Council is keen to work with us on that, and we are keen to make progress.

Mr Speaker: Anneliese Dodds.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, take two. The Environment Secretary said to Extinction Rebellion that he, at least, had got the message, but of course days later his Government were panned by the Solar Trade Association for new tax changes that will affect solar and storage schemes. That contrasts with Labour’s announcement last week of plans for 1.75 million households to benefit from the solar energy revolution. So will this Government abandon the damaging changes to VAT, match Labour’s solar investment plans and actually start taking renewables seriously?

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, we have an exemplary record in terms of our reduction of carbon. We are the top performer in the G7. It would be good to hear Opposition Members acknowledge the massive progress that we have made. The fact is that we are going to make more progress not by supporting a bunch of anti-capitalists that glue themselves to public transport, but by using market mechanisms instead, helping the economy grow. That is the way we improve the environment.
Fuel Duty Freeze

10. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the environmental effect of freezing fuel duty since 2010. [911011]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The price of fuel has only a marginal effect on how much fuel people purchase. That means that fuel duty freezes have a limited effect on emissions. Fuel costs, however, are a major expenditure for both households and businesses, which is why this Government have chosen to freeze fuel duty for nine successive years.

Daniel Zeichner: That is not the view of most people who actually know about these things. This Government have gone from climate emergency to climate complacency in just three weeks. There is 4% extra traffic on the roads because of the scrapping of the fuel duty escalator. What fiscal mechanisms is the Treasury contemplating to deal with climate change?

Robert Jenrick: I take it from the hon. Gentleman that he supports increasing fuel duty. He asks who has that opinion. Actually, most economists agree that fuel consumption is highly price-inelastic, because working people do not always have the choice to use public transport or cycle. Not everybody lives in a city like Cambridge, with excellent public transport. We support the working men and women of this country, particularly in towns and rural areas, and we have saved them £1,000 a year on their fuel bills.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I declare my role as vice-chair of the all-party group for fair fuel. As the Minister outlines, it is the Conservative party that has frozen fuel for nine consecutive years. Since 2010, my constituents and people across the country have saved £1,000. As he mentions, the Opposition parties suggest that that was an ill-judged decision. Does he agree with me that it is this Government and this party who are on the side of motorists and hard-working people?

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely. This Government will always support working people. We want to raise living standards. We are particularly conscious of those men and women who work in parts of the country, like the area my hon. Friend represents, where it is not easy to get to work. They need that extra money in their pockets to get on, do their jobs and run their businesses.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I have been saving the hon. Gentleman up for the delectionation of the House: Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): That was a very, very complacent answer to a very important question. Is it not a fact that the house is on fire? We want a radical tax like the one Mrs Thatcher introduced with Geoffrey Howe in 1981. Why do we not have a tax on banks, Amazon and all the other people making profits, and put the money into fighting climate change now, when the house is on fire?

Robert Jenrick: We on the Government Benches are not complacent about climate change; we are leading the world in this area. We are decarbonising faster than any other G20 country and we are investing billions of pounds in this area. If we want to tackle the challenge of decarbonisation, we will need to gather the greatest amount of private investment and innovation from the private sector. We will never be able to do that by going around nationalising industries below market value and making bellicose statements that shareholders are lining their pockets. The shareholders are the savers, the pensioners and the international investors that this country needs to thrive.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I urge the Minister to reject the representations from the Labour party for a £9 billion tax rise on hard-working motorists? Does he not agree that rather than sandbagging hard-working people, it would be better to invest in more electric charging infrastructure to give people a real choice?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and that is what the Government are doing: investing in ultra-low emission vehicles; increasing the capital allowances budget, now extended to 2023, for EV charge points; announcing a £400 million fund to get private sector investment in getting those charge points rolled out across the country; and, through the plug-in car grant, giving generous subsidies to help people to buy their first electric vehicle.

Business Rates Relief: Music Venues

11. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of extending business rates relief to more music venues. [911012]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The music sector contributes billions to the economy and so much more in terms of life enrichment, but the opportunity pipeline is being constricted as music venues close under pressure. Will the Minister agree to just a small tweak to the retail discount scheme guidance to make it clear that music venues are eligible?

Christian Matheson: The music sector contributes billions to the economy and so much more in terms of life enrichment, but the opportunity pipeline is being constricted as music venues close under pressure. Will the Minister agree to just a small tweak to the retail discount scheme guidance to make it clear that music venues are eligible?

Mel Stride: Music venues are eligible for many of the reliefs, worth £13 billion over the coming years, we have introduced since 2016, as well as the switch from uprating the multiplier from RPI to CPI. Many benefit from small business rates relief as well. I will of course, as with all representations, take the hon. Gentleman’s comments on board and consider them going forward.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Not all of the small private hotels and guest houses in Cleethorpes are noted as music venues, but they would benefit from additional relief to their business rates. They are finding trading particularly difficult at the moment. Would the Minister look sympathetically on representations from them?

Mel Stride: In short, yes. I always look sympathetically on any representations to reduce taxation.
Mr Speaker: What an agreeable and benevolent fellow the Minister is. We are deeply obliged to him.

Leaving the EU: Scotland

13. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [911014]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government published a detailed set of economic analyses on the long-term impacts of EU exit on the UK economy—its sectors, nations and regions, and the public finances—covering multiple EU exit scenarios. The analysis shows that the spectrum of outcomes for the future UK-EU relationship would deliver significantly higher economic output than in a no-deal scenario in all nations, including Scotland.

Stephen Gethins: The Minister is right to highlight those analyses, which show that every single Brexit will be damaging to our economy and will hit public services. Coming after a decade of Tory austerity, will he rule out a no-deal Brexit and use the comprehensive spending review to start investing in our public services?

John Glen: Clearly, the best way of avoiding a no-deal Brexit is to look favourably on what the Prime Minister brings back to the House of Commons in the week commencing 3 June.

16. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Brexit uncertainty is hurting firms across Scotland and the Bank of England has said that the Prime Minister's deal could cut GDP by 3%. Does the Chancellor agree with himself, when he told Radio 4 in November last year that the deal will leave the economy “slightly smaller” and that in pure economic terms, there will be a loss?

John Glen: I will tell the hon. Lady what is causing great concern and instability in the sector. I am responsible for—life insurance and the pensions industry, which is thriving in Glasgow and Edinburgh—and that is the fear of the SNP leadership introducing a new currency.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): From all the modelling and analysis that the Treasury has done in its economic forecasting, will the Minister tell us in what year he would expect the United Kingdom economy to perform better under a Brexit scenario than under a remain scenario?

John Glen: The result of the referendum was clear in 2016 across the United Kingdom, and we need to get on and deliver it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister did not quite answer the question from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). Is the Government’s default position still that on 31 October, we will leave on a no-deal basis if no agreement has been made?

John Glen: That is the legal default, but as my hon. Friend will know, the Government hope, even at this late hour, to persuade him of the merits of passing the deal in the week of 3 June.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is not the greatest threat of uncertainty to the Scottish economy the prospect of a second independence referendum?

John Glen: Absolutely. Another divisive referendum within 18 months would be completely contrary to what the First Minister said five years ago, which was that it was a “once in a generation” event. It would absolutely be a real crisis for Scotland.

Income Tax

14. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing income tax.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are proud of their record of reducing income taxes to enable people to keep more of what they earn. We have increased the personal allowance by over 90% in less than a decade. We have given 32 million people an income tax cut compared with 2015-16, and thanks to the changes that I made at the last Budget, a typical basic rate taxpayer will pay £130 less income tax this year than last year.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Chancellor for that answer, and I thank him and his team for getting to grips with the extraordinary annual structural deficit inherited from the Labour party. Bearing that in mind, and given that we are now on a course towards a balanced budget, will he focus with laser-like precision on continuing to reduce income tax for hard-working families, putting clear blue water between us and the socialists in the run-up to the next election?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the much improved state of the public finances and the direct link between that and our ability to consider further tax cuts. What I said at the spring statement remains the case: for the first time in a decade, this country now has choices—we have headroom because of the improved state of the public finances. We can choose to use that to support additional spending on public services, or we can choose to reduce the deficit more quickly. We can choose to invest in Britain’s future, or we can choose to cut taxes on ordinary working families. The luxury of choice is something that this country has not seen for a decade.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I think there must be an election coming up, because the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) is on the front page of The Daily Telegraph today saying that we should “Cut income tax for a ’fairer’ Britain”. We do need a fairer Britain, because we have the highest level of inequality in Europe. The so-called living wage does not solve inequality, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the House of Commons Library briefing of yesterday, so when it comes to the choices that the Chancellor is going to make, what is his choice in tackling inequality in Britain?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid I do not agree with the hon. Lady about the national living wage. We have set out an ambition for it to reach 60% of median earnings by next year, which we will achieve. As I said in the
spring statement, we now need to give a new mandate to the Low Pay Commission for the future trajectory of the national living wage, and I want us to be ambitious in doing that, but I do not want us to price low-skilled people out of work. That is why I have started a series of roundtables, the first of which was the week before last, with representatives from industry and the trade unions to decide what our strategy will be to increase the national living wage in this country.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): How many people in the west midlands are benefiting from recent increases to the personal allowance and the higher-rate threshold?

Mr Hammond: The answer is lots. Had I known my hon. Friend was going to ask me that, I would have been able to give him a precise answer. I will write to him.

Mr Speaker: Put a copy of the answer in the Library of the House—we will all find it most informative.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My party has advocated the raising of the personal allowance, and I am glad that the Chancellor has done that over the past few years, but does he agree that part of the problem now is that part-time and full-time employees on low pay, just below the threshold of £12,500, pay national insurance contributions? Will he consider eliminating that to the same level as the allowance?

Mr Hammond: We always have to find the most cost-effective way to deliver the effect we are looking for. We have chosen so far to do that by raising the personal allowance thresholds, but the hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly legitimate argument for a different approach in the future. As I have said, we will have choices as a result of the much improved state of the public finances.

Topical Questions

T1. [911026] Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal focus is to ensure the continued resilience of the UK economy at a time of domestic and international economic uncertainty. By maintaining our balanced approach to the public finances and continuing to focus on investment and cutting taxes for working families, we have ensured that public debt is now falling sustainably, employment is at a record high, wages are rising and we have ensured that public debt is now falling sustainably, on investment and cutting taxes for working families, and the approach to the public finances and continuing to focus on investment and cutting taxes for working families, and the approach in the future. As I have said, we will have choices as a result of the much improved state of the public finances.

Sarah Champion: The report by the all-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse demonstrated the economic impact of not supporting victims: 72% said it had had a negative impact on their career; 65% on their education; and 46% on their financial situation. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said about survivors of child sexual abuse. It is a priority for the spending review to make sure we deal with violence against women and girls.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I had a very useful meeting with the hon. Lady a month or so ago, and we are now taking forward the work and evidence she presented us with and working with the Home Office on looking at the economic benefits of taking more action to help survivors of child sexual abuse. It is a priority for the spending review to make sure we deal with violence against women and girls.

T2. [911027] Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): The Government have an excellent track record in tackling climate change, notwithstanding what Opposition Members said earlier, and I applaud their commitment to doing more. Will the Chancellor consider introducing incentives in the comprehensive spending review to encourage occupiers and owners of industrial and agricultural buildings to improve their energy efficiency?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The clean growth strategy set out our ambition to enable businesses and industry to improve energy efficiency by 20% by 2030. Today farmers in a community such as Ludlow can make use of the rural development programme for agricultural buildings, but we have also announced two new schemes. First, there is the £315 million investment in a new industrial energy transformation fund, and secondly, we have published a call for evidence on a business energy efficiency scheme focused on smaller businesses.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Chancellor’s speech to the CBI this evening has been much trailed. I welcome his clear warnings to his Conservative colleagues about the hit the economy would face from a no-deal Brexit, especially those who have said there is nothing to fear from a no deal. For the benefit of Members in the Chamber, will he explain what he sees as the impact of a no-deal Brexit and his clear view that with “all the preparation in the world” a no-deal Brexit will still damage our economy?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman: I may not have to take the trouble to go and deliver the speech this evening.

The right hon. Gentleman has raised a serious point. There are two separate effects of a no-deal Brexit that concern me. First, there will clearly be short-term disruption, which will have an unpredictable and potentially significant effect on our economy. Secondly, and probably more importantly, all the analysis that the Government and external commentators have published shows that there will be a longer-term effect, meaning that our economy will be smaller than it would otherwise have been. I did not come into politics to make our economy smaller; I came into politics to make our economy bigger, and to make our people better off.

John McDonnell: I shall be happy to deliver the Chancellor’s speech this evening. Any time!

The reality is that for many the Brexit vote was, and may well be again, a kick at the establishment: an establishment that has inflicted nine years of harsh austerity on them, and which many feel has ignored them. As has been revealed this week, that austerity programme has meant children going to school hungry,
with warm clothes or dry shoes, and single mothers with no food in their cupboards skipping meals so that their children can eat. Does the Chancellor even acknowledge the role that his austerity politics have played in delivering the Brexit vote?

Mr Hammond: I think the reasons behind the Brexit vote are complex, and it would be trite to stand here and try to identify them simplistically. Let me also remind the right hon. Gentleman of the contribution that his party’s Government made to the situation that we inherited, which caused us to have to make the tough decisions to which he has implicitly referred.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Ten days ago, I met heads and chairs of governors from across my constituency at Corfe Hill School. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury meet me to discuss their specific concerns about schools funding, and the need for additional funding for our schools in Poole and in Dorset as a whole?

Elizabeth Truss: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. We are looking at schools funding, alongside other funding, as part of the spending review. It is a public priority, and we are taking it very seriously.

T3. [911028] Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): We are the last generation that can act to prevent irreversible harm from being done to our planet, so we need to act with urgency. Will the Chancellor bring the tax on the use of virgin plastic to boost recycling and incentivise plastic-free options? We do not have three years to wait.

Robert Jenrick: I am proud that this country will be the first in the world to introduce a new, innovative plastic packaging tax. We are in the process of formulating the tax. We have finished the consultation, and have received a large number of responses. We will be presenting proposals in the forthcoming Budget.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Chancellor consider changing the method of assessing a property’s rateable value, so that all shops on the high street pay business rates that reflect their profitability and trading potential, putting them on a level playing field with their out-of-town and online competitors?

Mr Philip Hammond: I understand my hon. Friend’s wish to ensure the vibrancy of the high street, which is going through a very difficult period. Owing to the way in which the business rate system works, relieving the burden on any part of the system means imposing it somewhere else, so we would have to look carefully at that, but I will take my hon. Friend’s representation as a serious proposal and consider it.

T4. [911029] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Outsourced low-paid workers in both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are on strike because their employers, Interserve, ISS and Aramark, are refusing to pay the London living wage, and in some cases have not paid staff wages for weeks. Will the Chancellor stand up for those employees, and do whatever he can to help Departments bring outsourced contracts back in-house?

Mr Hammond: That is a matter for the Departments concerned. As the hon. Lady knows, there is a legal obligation to pay the national living wage, and we have put additional resources into ensuring that that obligation is enforced. We encourage employers to pay higher rates than the national living wage when they are able to, and we will continue to do so.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): When Sally Masterton discovered a £1 billion fraud at Lloyds Bank the bank discredited her, constructively dismissed her and prevented her from working with the police investigation. Five years later Lloyds apologised for her mistreatment but nobody at the bank has been formally investigated or sanctioned for this mistreatment. Will the Minister use his powers to instruct the Financial Conduct Authority to carry out that investigation?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The FCA is conducting two investigations into the events at HBOS Reading and Lloyds has instructed Linda Dobbs to look into who knew what when. It is absolutely clear now that such circumstances could not be repeated given the action we have taken with the senior managers regime, but I look forward to the outcome of those reviews and we will be taking action accordingly.

T5. [911030] Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): According to the Sunday Times rich list the 10 wealthiest people in the country have a combined wealth of £143 billion; half of them live in my constituency. Meanwhile, according to the Child Poverty Action Group, across Kensington and Chelsea 8,500 children—37%—live in poverty, and in one ward nearly half do. Inequality in my constituency is getting worse. When will the Chancellor reverse this trickle-up economy by chasing tax-dodging plutocrats who are stealing food from the mouths of our children, many of them from working poor families?

Mr Philip Hammond: We are chasing tax dodgers everywhere. [Interruption.] Yes, we are. We have raised £200 billion of additional revenue since 2010 by clamping down on tax avoidance and evasion. Yet what did I hear when I came into the Chamber today? I heard Labour Members seem to have a totally different view about.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): If we want more renewables and more electric cars we need a more resilient electricity grid, and that needs more investment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the last thing we need for a cleaner, greener Britain is for the Labour party to wipe billions of pounds off our National Grid’s investment capacity?

Mr Speaker: What we want is a brief sentence on the Government’s policy. We are not having dilations on the policies of other parties; that is not the purpose of Question Time.
Elizabeth Truss: I think the idea that an industry could be nationalised not at market value is completely wrong; that is fundamentally against the principle of property rights on which our entire economy is built.

T6. [91031] Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Government’s Social Mobility Commission recently stated that social mobility in the UK has stagnated over the last four years. One of its key recommendations is that the Government should significantly increase funding for further education in the upcoming spending review. Given that Bradford College plans to cut 131 of its staff, will the Chancellor listen to his Government’s own commission, boost FE funding and give the most disadvantaged students the opportunities they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: I am working very closely with the Department for Education, looking at the FE sector and at the new qualifications we are introducing, such as T-levels, and making sure the sector is sustainable in the future. We are also reforming it to deliver the best possible outcome for students.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What estimate has my right hon. Friend made of the effect on national debt of nationalising the National Grid and the effect it would have on the taxes paid by ordinary working people and the public services they receive in my constituency?

Mr Philip Hammond: We know that the cumulative burden of the commitments made by the Opposition Front Bench would reach almost £1 trillion over a Parliament, and I have heard—from [Interruption]—that the shadow Chancellor has a number, no doubt we will hear about it in a moment; I have heard him say that it does not matter because these companies are profitable, so the profits will pay the additional interest costs. But let me tell my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) something: I remember the last time we had widespread nationalisation in this country and—do you know what?—none of the companies the Government owned was profitable. Funny that, isn’t it?

T7. [91132] Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened in astonishment to the answers from the Financial Secretary and the Chancellor about the loan charges. Given that the Financial Secretary admitted that the Government were pursuing six companies on a legal basis over this—they are admitting they are the companies responsible—why do they pursue constituents like mine, many of whom were obliged to undertake these tax changes in order to get work?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): We are simply making sure that the tax that was always due is paid, and that is right and proper. As I have set out, we are taking a front-footed approach to clamping down on promoters, and that has included six recent arrests for potential criminal activities.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer acknowledge the important role that the national lottery has played in this country? When he looks at the national lottery, will he ensure that any future lottery that is run on a national basis is taxed at the same rate?

Mr Philip Hammond: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting question, and I will look carefully at the taxation of the national lottery and any future lotteries.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Anti-idling rules are a good start in reducing air pollution, but local authorities need the legal powers and resources to enforce them. Would the Treasury consider making new money available to local authorities to stop cars idling?

Robert Jenrick: The Government have committed £3.5 billion to improving air quality for the entire population, and I understand that that involves Bath and North East Somerset Council receiving nearly £6.5 million. I understand that the council is also expected to bid for part of the £220 million clean air fund, and I wish it luck with its application.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to hear that education is going to get a special focus in the forthcoming spending review. Please can Somerset have special consideration, since pupils there get way below the national average in both secondary and primary school funding? With a sound economy, I am sure that we can sort this out.

Elizabeth Truss: I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue. The reality is that there is a big gap in funding, with the lowest-funded authorities getting approximately £4,300 per pupil and the top-funded authorities getting £6,600. We are looking at that, because we have to have fairness across the country.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Revenue funding continues to flow to oil refineries in the middle east at the expense of tidal technology, an area in which we are a world leader. When will this Government accept that investing in tidal energy would bring huge benefits to the whole economy?

Robert Jenrick: This Government are investing in innovation in the tidal and marine sector. For example, we have invested in the marine innovation centre in Shetland, and I recently met a delegation to discuss those proposals. However, investments that we make on behalf of the taxpayer have to be the right strategic energy investments for the country and provide good value for money for the taxpayer.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I met headteachers and school governors across Cornwall recently, and they are very concerned about the pressure that their school budgets are under, so can I put in my bid for more money for education in the comprehensive spending review, and can we ensure that that money is fairly distributed so that schools in Cornwall get their fair share?

Elizabeth Truss: It sounds like I will not need to conduct any more meetings, because we can just continue this debate in the Chamber. I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I agree that there is unfairness across the system. We are working on that at the moment.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Wherever the Royal Navy deploys, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary deploys alongside it, but instead of
getting the 2.9% pay increase that the sailors got, RFA personnel got a below-inflation 1.5% increase. As the total cost of the difference is only £400,000, will the Government think again and give our brave RFA crews the pay rise they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: Royal Fleet Auxiliary personnel are part of the civil service, so this is a matter for the Cabinet Office, alongside the Ministry of Defence, but I am sure that it will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s representations.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): As the questions today have demonstrated, the Treasury needs to take a much longer-term view of investing in people and their human capital, just as it does in relation to physical capital. When is the Office for National Statistics’ human capital review finally going to report? It was announced in March 2018, but I cannot even find out whether its consultation has been published yet.

Mr Philip Hammond: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, because it was at her prompting that I originally asked the Office for National Statistics to look at how we measure and value human capital to ensure that there is no systematic bias against human capital in favour of physical capital. The ONS has in fact delivered its draft report, and the question of how we measure and value human capital will be at the centre of the spending review process.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Has the time not come for the Chancellor to heed the call from the Westminster leaders of seven Opposition parties to fund proper compensation for those infected and affected by the NHS blood scandal across the whole United Kingdom?

Mr Hammond: That is an issue for the Department of Health and Social Care. I understand the hon. Lady’s concerns, and I will pass them on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.
British Steel

12.40 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the discussions he has had with British Steel regarding its future.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): My Department is in regular conversation with a wide range of companies, including those in the steel industry. As the House will be aware, the Government entered into a commercial agreement with British Steel on 24 April, valued at £120 million, relating to the company’s obligations under the EU emissions trading system. The Secretary of State updated the House on that agreement in an oral statement on 1 May—the first available opportunity after market-sensitive elements of the resulting transaction were concluded. The commercial agreement reached with British Steel ensured that the company was able to meet its 2018 EU ETS obligations under a deed of forfeiture. It also ensured that the company did not incur an EU ETS non-compliance fine which, coupled with 2018 ETS liabilities, would have equated to a financial pressure of over £600 million—a sum that would have put the company under significant financial strain.

The speculation regarding the future of British Steel will no doubt be creating uncertainty for those employed by the company. As shown through the ETS agreement, the Government have been willing to act. We have been in ongoing discussions with the company, and I am sure the House will understand that we cannot comment in detail at this stage. We will update the House when more information is available. I can, however, reassure the House that, subject to strict legal bounds, the Government will leave no stone unturned in their support of the steel industry.

Yesterday I signed up to the UK steel charter. We want to acknowledge and support the initiative from the industry, and the charter is one element of that. We have been also been encouraging the UK steel sector to strengthen its engagement with all existing and potential domestic steel consumers, maximising opportunities to benefit from the £3.8 billion a year of high market value opportunities that we have identified by 2030. We recognise that global economic conditions continue to be challenging for the industry, which is why the Government are working with the sector, unions and the devolved Administrations to support a sustainable, productive and modern UK steel sector.

Gill Furniss: It goes without saying that the UK steel industry is critical to our manufacturing base and that protecting the industry should be of paramount importance to the Government. The industry provides over 30,000 highly skilled, well-paid jobs in the UK, and British Steel directly employs around 4,500 in Scunthorpe, with a further 20,000 down the supply chain. Does the Minister agree the Government should be doing everything in their power to prevent British Steel from entering administration?

It is reported that British Steel had initially asked the Government for a £75 million loan in emergency financial support and subsequently reduced that request to around £30 million following negotiations with the Department. Will the Minister outline the asks of British Steel throughout the negotiations? Have the discussions included just financial support or a wider package of measures to support the site in Scunthorpe and the steel industry more widely?

Will the Minister confirm the status of the negotiations and why they are reported to have stalled in recent days? It has been reported that one of the reasons was the Department’s frustration with Greybull Capital’s apparent unwillingness to put money on the table. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? What impact did the company’s decision to acquire Ascoval last week have on the negotiations? If no deal can be reached with Greybull, have the Government considered any other options, such as bringing British Steel into public ownership?

Finally, the steel sector is facing myriad issues, from the value of sterling and the uncertainty around future trading with the EU through to US trade tariffs, and the Government could have taken steps to address them, such as greater procurement of UK steel, agreeing a sector deal, as the industry was requesting, and taking action on energy prices. Does the Minister accept that this Government have simply failed to take the steps necessary to ensure that UK steel remains competitive?

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the commitment that she and her family have shown to the steel sector over many years. I represent the constituency of Pendle, which is dominated by manufacturing, and I share her passion for the steel sector. I will leave no stone unturned, and neither will the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in supporting the UK steel sector.

As the House will know, we can only act within the strict bounds of what is legally possible under domestic and European law. I can assure the House that we will continue to do whatever is in our power to support the UK steel industry and those who work in the sector. We are working with the sector, the unions and the devolved Administrations to support all aspects of the UK steel sector.

The Government have taken a number of important longer-term steps, including ensuring that social and economic factors can be taken into account in public sector steel procurement, and providing more than £291 million in compensation to the steel sector since 2013 to make energy costs more competitive. We have also published a pipeline of upcoming national infrastructure projects every year to enable steel businesses to plan for future demand.

As I mentioned earlier, I signed the UK steel charter yesterday, and I will be encouraging other hon. Members and Government Departments to do the same. We want to acknowledge the importance of this industry.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Friday I had one of my regular catch-ups at the Tata steelworks in Corby, and we specifically talked about support for the steel charter. I was obviously pleased to see the Minister at yesterday’s event, but will he both adopt the charter and action it as quickly as possible so that the industry can rapidly feel the benefit of the course it advances?
Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is a huge champion of the steel sector. I was pleased to meet representatives of Tata yesterday, and I have regular engagements with companies across the steel sector to talk about these issues. The UK steel charter is a really good initiative, and I am proud to have signed it on behalf of my Department. I will be encouraging other Departments to do the same.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It was left to the SNP Scottish Government to secure a future for Scottish steel with the transfer of the Dalzell and Clydebridge plants to Liberty. Although Liberty still expects operations at British Steel to continue as normal for the time being, it is preparing and taking the necessary measures to protect the business from a potential shortage of slab, which would affect the Liberty works. Will the support shown to British Steel, not to mention Nissan, be given to any Scottish firms affected? British Steel needed a loan earlier this month to pay its £100 million Brexit fine. Given that British Steel is clear that Brexit-related issues are taking the firm to the brink, how many more jobs will Westminster sacrifice before it gets the message that Brexit must be stopped?

Andrew Stephenson: I am very keen to work with the devolved Administrations to support the UK steel sector. Only this week I met the Secretary of State for Wales and a Welsh steel company to talk about support for the steelworks in that part of the United Kingdom. I am very keen to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that we have a thriving steel sector in Scotland as well.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend undertake to avoid halving both output and employment? That is what the last Labour Government achieved.

Andrew Stephenson: We have taken decisive action to support the UK steel sector. There are more things we could do, and I am keen to explore with industry what more we can do, but I agree that the challenges here have been going on for a number of years. This Government see the steel sector as fundamentally important to British industry, and we will continue to leave no stone unturned in supporting the sector.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Steelworkers and their families in my constituency and across the country are anxious, as the Minister has recognised. Pragmatic decisions in the coming days could still avert another industrial disaster. I have spoken to the trade unions, which are clear from the messages they are getting that there is still a deal to be done. It is important that, across the House and outside the House, we all work to make sure this delivers positively for the future of the British steel industry. Does the Minister agree that the stakes are too high for the Government, for us, to fail?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments; we have discussed this issue over the past few days. When we are in a position to update the House with more information, we will do so. I hope that he will acknowledge that the Secretary of State is one of the most diligent Ministers in coming to the Dispatch Box as soon as information is readily available. At this stage, however, I cannot comment on specifics.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): In the past two years, I had the pleasure of dealing with the steel industry in my capacity as Minister at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I can certainly confirm that the Secretary of State and the ministerial team are very much behind the steel industry. Does the Minister agree that one of the problems affecting firms such as British Steel, which has an excellent business plan and very good management, is the uncertainty about the trading relationship with the European Union and outside it? Nonsense is talked about World Trade Organisation rules and other things, under which there may be a 20% tariff. Will the Minister, at the Dispatch Box, please ask the Opposition and Members on the Government side who voted against the Prime Minister’s deal to change their minds and get Brexit sorted out very quickly? That will help the steel industry more than anything.

Andrew Stephenson: I echo the comments of my predecessor, whose shoes I am still trying to fill; I only started six weeks into the job. All Members should reflect on the real-world impacts of the decisions—or lack of them—that they make in this place on businesses, and how that can affect thousands of jobs and whole towns across the United Kingdom.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Government have presided over the decline of the UK steel industry: the closure of Redcar in 2016; the lack of assurances obtained from Greybull when it took over British Steel; the chaotic handling of Brexit; and the failure to agree a sector deal with the steel industry, which it has been crying out for. The Government now have a chance to right some of those wrongs. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to protect jobs, investment and our vital manufacturing base in our steel sector.

Andrew Stephenson: In this role, I want to do everything that I can to support the UK steel sector. We were the first country in Europe to take account of socioeconomic factors in public sector procurement. We have provided more than £291 million in compensation for high energy costs in the UK. We have provided and published a pipeline of upcoming national infrastructure projects, and last year I signed the UK steel charter. We are doing a lot as a Government, although there is more that we can do. I stand ready to help the sector in any way I can.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s answers today and appreciate that there are limitations on what he can say at this time. I thank him and his team at the Department for all the work I know they are doing to deliver a sustainable future for British Steel. I urge him to impress on Greybull Capital its moral and legal responsibility to the hundreds of men and women, in my constituency and elsewhere, to deliver a sustainable future for the industry.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is a champion of steelworkers in his constituency. We will, of course, update the House when we have more information on any specific discussions with any steel company. That is all I can say.
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Today we are rightly talking about British Steel and the strong action needed to save the company. Surely the Minister understands that the situation makes it even more crucial that we have a robust and positive industrial strategy, with steel as a key part, and a sector deal. That is what steelworkers at Orb, Llanwern and Liberty in my constituency want. When will the Government act?

Andrew Stephenson: We have a robust industrial strategy and remain open to a steel sector deal. Since I have been appointed, I have been meeting steel industry representatives and discussing that, along with other issues. I have mentioned the steel pipeline, support on energy costs and a range of things that the Government are already doing. We need to see through the steel sector deal whether we can take that further.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): As the Minister knows, part of the Scunthorpe site and probably the lion’s share of workers at Scunthorpe live in my constituency. I thank him and the Secretary of State, on my behalf and that of the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for their frequent communication with us over the past week or so.

Certainty is very important to the industry. That is why, with some reservations, I have consistently supported the Prime Minister’s deal, to end the Brexit uncertainty, and I will continue to do so. I hope that other colleagues will also do that, as British Steel has asked it of Members of Parliament.

Will the Minister confirm that, if the company were nationalised, it would be subject to the same rules on Government investment had it remained in private ownership?

Andrew Stephenson: Delivering a negotiated deal from the EU remains the Government’s top priority, and I hope Members will vote for the deal. My hon. Friend is exactly correct: nationalisation is not the solution. If the worst should happen and the company goes into administration, the Government will step in to secure the asset this time—not let it go to waste so that it is still sitting there three and a half years later—and secure the workforce and their livelihoods?

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Redcar steelworks was closed by the Government three and a half years ago, with the loss of 3,100 jobs. After that biggest act of industrial vandalism, everybody came together and said, “Never again!” The Minister has said that he will leave no stone unturned, but is he willing to accept that if the worst should happen and the company goes into administration, the Government will step in to secure the asset this time—not let it go to waste so that it is still sitting there three and a half years later—and secure the workforce and their livelihoods?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government have been willing to act. We provided a £120 million bridging facility to the company earlier this month, which shows that we are fleet of foot and responsive to businesses that approach us with their concerns. I cannot comment on any current negotiations with this or any other company, but the Government are responsive, and, when it comes to this specific company, we have already shown our willingness to act, with that £120 million.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I was born in 1974: in my entire lifetime, unemployment has never been lower than it is today. Should we not remember that picture? It is based not on policies such as renationalisation but on maintaining pro-business policies that keep us attractive and open to inward investment.

Andrew Stephenson: I see the steel sector as fundamentally important to the British economy, and we are keen to do everything we can to support it. However, as I have already said and the House will know, we can only act within the strict bounds of what is legally possible under domestic and European law.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is now nearly two years since the Helm review, yet British steel producers are paying 50% more for energy than their competitors in Germany and nearly twice as much as those in France. Does the Minister accept that that disparity has to be removed? If so, what action will he take to remove it and when will he take that action?

Andrew Stephenson: We have already provided £291 million in compensation to the steel sector since 2013, including £53 million in 2018, to make energy costs more competitive. I am particularly keen to see the steel sector benefit from the industrial energy transformation fund, which is backed by an additional £315 million of investment. I have already had discussions with UK Steel about how firms across the sector can make the most use of this transformative funding.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Government for the action they are taking. Does the Minister agree that, just as our agriculture sector is vital for the national interest in food security, our steel sector is vital for the national interest in defence and manufacturing security?
Andrew Stephenson: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. His Stafford constituency has, like mine, significant numbers of people who work in manufacturing, and we all know how important the UK steel sector is. In my role as Minister I will do everything I can to support the sector.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): British Steel’s service centre for Ireland is located at Lisburn in my constituency, and those jobs are vital for our local economy. I echo the comments of other right hon. and hon. Members in encouraging the Government to look more closely at a sector deal for the steel industry. As the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said, the sector is vital for the UK economy, and we encourage the Government to go the extra mile.

Andrew Stephenson: I remain open to discussions on a sector deal with the steel industry, and I have already met companies. I will certainly do everything I can to ensure that such a deal is reached without delay.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which he is handling himself and the Department, having come into his new post with such an issue to deal with. This is a serious matter, but we must remember that steel is an internationally competitive and traded commodity. The industry currently faces the challenge of the US-China trade war and tariffs being imposed on it. Will my hon. Friend inform the House what measures the Government can take to seek to provide some protection from the dumping of Chinese steel in this country?

Andrew Stephenson: My right hon. Friend is correct that this is a global issue. The 33 countries that are members of the G20 global forum on steel excess capacity have agreed important policy principles and recommendations to tackle unfair subsidies and practices. It is important that all G20 global forum members act on that agreement and are held to account for unfair practices.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): People in Barnsley whose jobs depend on industrial supply chains will be astounded if the Government let the owners of British Steel walk away with tens of millions while they suffer the consequences of administration. Will the Minister guarantee that that will not happen?

Andrew Stephenson: I cannot be drawn on the specifics, but through our industrial strategy the Government want to work with all businesses, large and small, to ensure the success of British industry. I see the British steel industry as an important part of that and we need to work together to ensure its long-term success.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Scunthorpe produces the long products that are vital for major infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2. Will the Minister assure the House that projects such as HS2 will use British steel? Will he ensure that he does everything possible to ensure that British-manufactured steel is used in major infrastructure projects?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government have worked hard to produce a pipeline of the steel products being used in the public sector, and the details were published for the first time this year. Many other large construction projects in the UK, such as Hinkley Point C, are contributing significantly to new orders and future business for the steel sector. We hope that our transparency will lead to better public procurement, and we will work with the industry to ensure that it uses the data to ensure further support and orders for the British steel sector.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Minister talks about the steel pipeline, but only half the steel that the UK Government buy is from the UK. What steps will the Government take to increase dramatically the share of UK steel that is used in Government projects?

Andrew Stephenson: We were the first EU country to implement socioeconomic and environmental factors in public procurement rules on the purchase of steel. For the first time ever, we have published information for not only Departments but their arm’s length bodies on how much steel they have procured over the past financial year and how they have applied the steel procurement guidance. I hope that that will allow greater transparency in the sector so that we can see exactly where steel is coming from and ensure that we can increase the proportion that is bought from UK suppliers.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Some 88% of structural steel used in the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier programme was sourced from UK producers. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK steel industry is vital to our nation’s defence security, and will he do all he can to support it?

Andrew Stephenson: UK steel is incredibly important, not only to our defence sector but to other sectors. The published details on the upcoming steel requirements for national infrastructure projects show that the Government plan to use more than 3 million tonnes of steel, until 2021, for infrastructure projects such as Hinkley Point and for the maintenance and upgrading of the UK’s motorway network. Steel is important not just to defence but across a range of sectors, which is why the Government stand ready to support the UK steel sector.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): British Steel has made it clear that Brexit uncertainty is scaring customers away and is a major cause of its problems. There is a simple solution: stop Brexit and stem the flow of job losses and relocations. If the Minister is not willing to take such action, will the Government instead look into the idea of setting up a Brexit support fund, which could be used, where appropriate, to support businesses and sectors that have been damaged by Brexit?

Andrew Stephenson: British Steel has been clear that Members of this House should vote for the deal, which I have voted for three times. All Members should reflect on the real-world impacts of the decisions that we make in this place, or the lack thereof, on businesses and the people we represent.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Minister is right to consider jobs at risk, particularly when they relate to what are hopefully relatively short-term Brexit uncertainties, but to be fair Greybull did buy the...
business after the referendum and therefore might have expected some volatility ahead. Will the Minister confirm to the House that if he decides to support the business, it will be an isolated case, rather than an ongoing policy of supporting failing businesses?

Andrew Stephenson: All support that is provided for businesses has to be compliant with UK domestic law and EU law. It has to pass various commerciality tests to be legal and compliant with state aid rules. We always stand ready to work with UK businesses to protect UK interests and jobs, but any support that we provide has to be legal.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is almost three years to the day since we were battling to save the entire Tata operation throughout the United Kingdom. It beggars belief that we are here having the same conversation and asking the same questions. The fact is that the fundamental problem is that the British steel industry is not able to compete on a level playing field because of the Government’s complete failure to have an industrial strategy to support it. When will the Government stop leaving stones unturned and give the steel industry the sector deal it urgently needs?

Andrew Stephenson: I know the hon. Gentleman is incredibly passionate about this issue. I met representatives of Tata Steel yesterday, and we discussed many issues relating specifically to the Port Talbot site. Rather than a bleak picture, they painted a positive picture of how that site has grown over recent years. There has been significant investment and the company wishes to invest more. The Government will work with Tata Steel to support it in any way possible, and we will certainly work with colleagues in the Welsh Assembly to ensure that if any support is required it is delivered. Across the board, we are working to support the UK steel sector.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): The Minister talked about public sector procurement; my understanding is that around 50% of the steel used in public sector procurement is produced here in the United Kingdom. Why is the proportion not higher?

Andrew Stephenson: That is a good question. We were the first EU country to implement socioeconomic and environmental factors in public procurement rules, which means we can take into account the impact on carbon emissions and on local communities. This is the first year in which that information has been published and made readily available. Now that it has been published, I have asked my officials to look into how we can consider not only that information but the steel pipeline, to ensure that we support British companies as much as we can. If British companies need to transform some of their processes to supply a greater proportion of UK domestic demand, I am sure my Department will do whatever it can to support them but, as I have said several times, any support that we provide to any businesses in the steel sector has to be compliant with UK domestic law and EU state aid law.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The forthcoming Government project to build the Royal Navy fleet solid support ships will clearly use enormous amounts of steel. Quite simply, why can the Minister not ensure that those ships are built of UK steel?

Andrew Stephenson: We are working with industry on a range of projects to ensure that a higher proportion of the UK domestic need for steel is supplied by British companies. As I have mentioned before, the steel pipeline has identified those projects, which means that steel companies can see when the demand is coming many years ahead. Hopefully, we can ensure that a much higher proportion of our domestic steel requirement is supplied from British Steel projects.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): To say that the Government have left no stone unturned is, frankly, an insult to an industry that has been sent to the back of the queue when it comes to a sector deal. When will it get the sector deal for which it has been crying out for month after month after month? I ask the Minister to give us a very specific date.

Andrew Stephenson: Sector deals are not about value signalling. We are not doing sector deals randomly across the board. We are doing sector deals where we believe that they can deliver a transformation in productivity and enhance production in any sector. The UK steel sector, like the global steel sector, is challenged by global economic conditions, oversupply and a range of other factors. We have taken firm action on sorting out energy costs. We are supplying millions of pounds in compensation. We have launched the industrial energy transformation fund and we have the industrial strategy challenge fund. There is the steel pipeline and now the steel charter. This Government are doing an awful lot to help the UK steel sector.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister might respond to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who said that the stakes are too high to fail for this vital national industry as well as for the regional economy in the Humber area.

Andrew Stephenson: The closure of any steel blast furnace or steel mill would have a significant impact on the locality. All the sites across the United Kingdom employ large numbers of people, which is why we are very keen to support all sites across the country. However, as I have said, the Government are willing to take action and intervene where we can. We supplied the £120 million bridging facility to British Steel recently, which I hope shows the level of commitment from this Government. We will work with all companies across the sector to support them, but any support we provide to any business has to be judged against British and European law.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said, the Tory Government have form in failing to support this steel industry. Ministers turned their backs on Teesside in particular when we lost the country’s most efficient blast furnace, leaving thousands of people out of work. Now, more Teesside steel workers face an uncertain future. We need Ministers to act to save those jobs that we have left, but also to accelerate the investment on Teesside to create the well-paid jobs that have been promised but not delivered. When will we get these jobs?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government are working to support the sector. As I have just mentioned, a £120 million bridging facility has been supplied to British Steel to
support its EU emissions trading system compliance, which demonstrates that graphically. In the past few weeks, we have been working with the sector on high energy costs, we are working with the sector to reduce its carbon emissions and we are working across the board to support all regions of the United Kingdom.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What reassurance can the Minister offer to the many apprentices who work at the Scunthorpe plant from my Great Grimsby constituency and to the colleges that arrange those apprenticeships in the event that the Government’s intervention is not sufficient?

Andrew Stephenson: Media speculation about this site and about the financial future of this site is unhelpful. If we have anything to say we will update the House when there is more information available.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Last week, Martin Foster, a loyal long-serving steel worker and the Unite union convenor from Scunthorpe, told Parliament: no deal, no British Steel. In urging, as he did, that a deal be done with a strong customs union at its heart, does the Minister agree that he is right and that British Steel is right? Does he also agree that those who think that we can crash out of the European Union without a deal and rely on World Trade Organisation terms just do not live on the same planet as those Scunthorpe steel workers whose whole future is now threatened?

Andrew Stephenson: British Steel wrote to local MPs in the Scunthorpe area to urge them to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal. I have voted for it three times. How many times has the hon. Gentleman voted for it?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Primary steel making in Scotland ended in 1992 with the closure of Ravenscraig, but the two remaining secondary steel plants that process plate are heavily reliant on the Scunthorpe blast furnaces, which supply them with steel and, in turn, the shipbuilding industry in Glasgow. Not only have we seen this Government leading efforts to block action against Chinese dumping at the European Commission, but we have seen them diluting efforts to ensure maximised content for British manufactured products in renewables projects. We have seen them move the goalposts from 60% of manufactured content to 60% of through-life content. When will the Minister understand the reality of the impact that these damaging decisions are having on the British steel industry and reverse them?

Andrew Stephenson: We are working with the G20 global forum on steel. There are currently 46 EU trade defence measures in place to protect UK steel producers from unfair trade imports. As we move to leave the EU and operate a trade policy, the UK will continue to champion free trade, but will also take a proportionate approach to trade remedies.

1.15 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I think I was going to hear a point of order from Mr Blomfield and then I will come to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone).

Paul Blomfield: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be grateful for your advice on an urgent matter. One of my constituents is a Zimbabwean national, an asylum seeker, who had an outstanding claim and who, on arrival at Vulcan House immigration centre in Sheffield for a routine interview, was met by officials of the Zimbabwean Government. The immigration rules make it clear that the Home Office should not take steps for the removal of an individual from the UK while a fresh claim is being made as it obviously puts her at greater risk of persecution by the Zimbabwean Government about which there is great concern.

I wrote to the Immigration Minister about this issue on 27 February, seeking an urgent response. Despite repeated emails and calls to the MPs’ correspondence unit, I have not received any response and the latest update was simply that my letter was passed to a director for consideration two months after I sent it on 25 April. This matter has become urgent because my constituent has now been told that her claim has been denied and that she must leave the UK. It appears to me that the Home Office has acted in contravention of the immigration rules.

I would be grateful for your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I can progress this matter urgently with the Minister for Immigration, as my representations to her have been directed to the correspondence unit, and my representations to the correspondence unit have yielded nothing. I would also welcome your advice on how I can be reassured that my constituent will not be removed from the UK until the matter is resolved.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it.

The hon. Gentleman raises both a general concern about the Home Office’s response to urgent correspondence from Members of Parliament and a specific matter about the possible removal from the UK of his constituent. On the latter point, which is clearly of great importance to his constituent, I hope that what he says has been heard on the Treasury Bench and will be conveyed to the relevant Minister without delay. Traditionally, the Leader of the House under successive Governments—I hope that this continues to be the case, and I have no reason to think otherwise—has accepted some responsibility for chasing Ministers where replies are tardy or, in terms of content, insubstantial—that is to say holding. I very much hope that that will continue to be the case and that the matter will be pursued. There is a responsibility on Ministers, timeously and substantively, to respond both to questions from hon. and right hon. Members and to correspondence from them. Simply to hive the
matter off and to subcontract responsibility to some outside agency is not the right way to proceed in terms of courtesy to colleagues who are, after all, the elected representatives of their constituents. On the general point, which will be of concern to Back Benchers across the House, I underline that it is unsatisfactory if there are not prompt and substantive responses. That does need to change.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Apologies that I could not give you advance notice, but this matter has only just come to my attention. Apparently the Prime Minister is going to make a speech at 4 o’clock this afternoon about what is in the withdrawal agreement Bill—announcing new Government policy. It has always been a convention of this House that new Government policy should be announced via a statement on the Floor of the House before it is announced to the media. Mr Speaker, have you been advised whether the Government are going to make a statement today?

Mr Speaker: I have received no notification of that. As the hon. Gentleman and others will be aware, I have been attending to my duties in the Chair since the start of business at 11.30 am, so I am not aware of this matter. [Interruption.] In fact, I have just had an indication that the Prime Minister may deliver a speech, but I am certainly not aware of any intention to make a statement to this House. Knowing what a fastidious and indefatigable parliamentarian the hon. Gentleman is, I rather imagine that he will not let his concern rest at this point; I fully expect that he will pursue the matter. There may be a statement from the Prime Minister in due course. Members may seek to catch my eye at Prime Minister’s questions tomorrow, and I am sure that there will be full opportunities for proper scrutiny of this and other matters. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your own stricture during yesterday’s Defence questions, could you assist us further on the position of Northern Ireland veterans? As I understand it, we are due a written statement later today from the Defence Secretary on the position of veterans of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we still have no statement from the Northern Ireland Secretary in respect of those Northern Ireland veterans whose future is now very uncertain, as they do not know whether or not they are likely to be arrested, charged and prosecuted in respect of allegations made during the troubles in Northern Ireland. Surely the Northern Ireland Secretary should not be hiding from the House, but should be coming forward and making her announcement in the proper way.

Mr Speaker: As the right hon. Gentleman says, I did offer some strictures—as he puts it—to the House yesterday. My impression was that those strictures were not unwelcome, particularly as far as Back-Bench Members were concerned. At this point, I am not aware of any intention on the part of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to come to the Chamber to deliver an oral statement on the matter. However, the right hon. Gentleman, who speaks with very considerable experience and authority in this place, has made his concern clear. That concern was also articulated in the most unmistakable terms by a number of Members yesterday. There must be an opportunity for Members to question and probe the Secretary of State on this matter. If, therefore, an oral statement is not forthcoming, there are other tried and tested means of securing the presence of a Minister in the Chamber. I am quite sure that the right hon. Gentleman does not require a tutorial from me on that matter, and that sooner or later somebody will take advantage of that opportunity—probably sooner, rather than later.
Pregnancy and Maternity (Redundancy Protection)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.22 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit making employees redundant during pregnancy, maternity leave and the period of six months from the end of pregnancy; and for connected purposes.

It is a scandal that in 2019 so many women should be fearful of losing their jobs simply because they are pregnant, so I am introducing this Bill to protect pregnant women and new mothers from redundancy. My Bill sets out to strengthen the existing protection that new mothers have under the law by adopting much of the model already in use in Germany. It would stop an employer from being able to make a woman redundant from the point that she notifies them that she is pregnant until six months after the end of her maternity leave; in Germany, that period is currently three months. There would be an exception where the employer ceases to carry on business where the pregnant woman or new mother is employed. The protection is specifically in relation to redundancy. It would not, for instance, apply if a dismissal was put in place for gross misconduct. That would be outside of the scope of the Bill.

There are half a million pregnant women in the workplace every year, and the Government should be applauded for achieving record numbers of women in work. However, many women go on to take a period of maternity leave before returning to work and, shockingly, research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission finds that one in 20 of these women is made redundant while pregnant or on maternity leave. Overall, more than 50,000 pregnant women every year feel that they have no alternative but to leave their job when they are pregnant. The cost of this situation is high for women on so many levels. The EHRC says that pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination results in job losses and a cost to women of between £47 million and £113 million a year. The costs to the taxpayer are also significant, as the Government forgo taxes and pay increased benefits to the tune of between £14 million and £17 million.

This scandal also holds back our economy. The broader economic advantages of encouraging women’s participation in the labour market are well documented. According to a report by McKinsey, encouraging women’s participation in work and ensuring that they are protected from discrimination could add as much as £150 billion to the UK economy. If the Government are to achieve their objective of eliminating the gender pay gap, they need to tackle maternity discrimination at its roots.

So why do we need to protect new and expectant mothers in particular from redundancy? We already legally protect maternity leave for multiple and important reasons. Maternity leave is a time for bonding with a new baby, for recovering from the physical and mental strain of pregnancy and birth, and for learning to handle the significant challenges of parenthood. It is no time to be going for a job interview for a new post, nor to be distracted or driven to distraction by the stress of a redundancy process—a process in which, because she is on leave for a prolonged period, a new mother will simply be unable to participate on equal terms with her other colleagues. In short, it is no time to be made redundant. That is the reasoning behind the existing protections. The problem is that those protections simply do not work in practice.

Keen-eyed colleagues will have noted that this Bill comes on the heels of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy consultation, which is looking at extending the existing protections to six months after maternity leave has ended. The current protections state that if a woman is made redundant during her maternity leave, she must be offered any suitable alternative vacancies. Extending this provision for six months would not be a negative step—I am sure it would be welcomed in some quarters—but it would not solve the problem. The law as it currently stands is too often ignored or circumvented by employers, either because it is poorly understood or due to ingrained stereotypes about new mothers’ place in the workplace, so the existing protection does not work.

This Bill proposes a much simpler and clearer protection, drawing on the proposals of the Women and Equalities Committee in 2016. The Committee recommended that the Government consider the German model. I reiterate that recommendation today because in Germany, where 72% of women are in work—a higher proportion than in the UK—a new or expectant mother cannot be made redundant unless the employer has secured the consent of a specific public authority, which is only given in exceptional circumstances. The Government’s consultation offered a response to that recommendation, objecting on the basis that it would not be appropriate to apply an approach to enforcement that is fundamentally different from that of the rest of employment law.

The Government are already planning to bring forward proposals for a new single enforcement body, so perhaps the novel approach that the Committee put forward may not now be out of the question. But assuming it is, the Bill I propose today answers those criticisms directly. It would not need a new watchdog to enforce it. The upgraded right would simply be enforced through employment tribunals or through the automatic unfair dismissal provisions that already exist in the Employment Rights Act 1996. The proposal would fit seamlessly within existing structures. It would not require a new quango. It is in line with the Government’s aims. It has been shown to work on other shores. The major change it would make is to offer pregnant women the sort of protection that is long overdue. We know that the protection that is currently written into law is not effective. At present, more mothers are made redundant during maternity leave than before or afterwards, despite the current protections in place.

Charities offering legal advice to pregnant women, such as Maternity Action, tell me that employers routinely ignore the existing protections. Take the story of one woman who called the Maternity Action helpline recently. She was booked in to give birth by caesarean the following week. Her employer had just told her that her role had been identified as being at risk of redundancy, along with the rest of her team. She was being asked to apply for one of the remaining roles, in line with the current law, but the assessments and interviews would happen over the next month—the period in which she
would be in hospital and at home recovering from the caesarean. The existing regulations should have prevented her employer from demanding that she attend interviews while on maternity leave, but these rules have not been understood or applied by the employer in this case. I am afraid that that is just one of a catalogue of cases that were put forward to us by charities and to the Select Committee when it undertook its inquiry.

Under the current system, the odds are stacked against each of these women, as they are absent from the workplace during their maternity leave. For a woman to challenge her employer’s unlawful behaviour, she would have to go to an employment tribunal—not an attractive prospect for any employee, but particularly one who is looking after the needs of a newborn baby at home. Perhaps unsurprisingly, fewer than 1% of women who have been discriminated against in pregnancy go to employment tribunal.

My Bill would strip out the complexity of the protection available to these women. We would be able to tell a woman that from the time she is pregnant to six months after she returns to work, she cannot be made redundant, unless the employer is closing down all of the business or ceasing the work that she is employed to do. Women who experience a stillbirth or miscarriage would similarly be protected for up to six months from the end of their pregnancy or any leave that they were entitled to. The woman’s employer would also be able to easily comprehend their duty, making it easier to comply and harder to inadvertently discriminate.

The change that I propose has the support of Members across the House and organisations such as Maternity Action and the Fawcett Society, which have been invaluable in helping to draft the Bill. Rather than simply extending the existing protections, which we know do not go far enough, we need robust legislation that takes the onus off women. That is precisely what this Bill will do. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Ordered,**

That Mrs Maria Miller, Eddie Hughes, Vicky Ford, Dominic Raab, Jess Phillips, Sarah Champion, Jo Swinson, Liz Saville Roberts, Angela Crawley, Caroline Lucas, Helen Whately and Antoinette Sandbach present the Bill.

Mrs Maria Miller accordingly presented the Bill.

**Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 392).**

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order,** Mr Speaker. Every single word that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has just said is, I think, supported by the whole House. Doubtless legislation would sail through the House if there were an opportunity for it to do so, but there is no private Members’ Bill day on which to advance such a Bill, and we cannot even have a ballot for private Members’ Bills until we have Prorogation and a new Session of Parliament. Is it not time we had one?

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman makes his own point in his own way. It is very clear, it is on the record, and doubtless, as he hopes, it will be picked up elsewhere. **[Interruption.]** The hon. Gentleman pessimistically chuntering from a sedentary position, “and ignored”. He should have more belief in himself and more faith in the force of his own message. **[Interruption.]** The former Government Chief Whip chuntering from a sedentary position, “No, he should be a realist.” Well, we are always grateful to the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin). It is good at least to see a smile on his face.
Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill


1.34 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to be opening the Second Reading debate on the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill. This has been a very long time coming. Today we can move decisively to end inaction and protect our Parliament for future generations. Let us not be under any illusion about the possible consequences if we fail to take action. The tragic fire at Notre Dame has served as a stark reminder of the risks to this historic building. There is no doubt that the best way to avoid a similar incident here is to get on with the job of protecting the thousands of people working here and the millions who come to visit.

Members of this House will be well aware of the problems in the Palace. There have recently been three significant incidents of falling masonry—in Norman Shaw North, outside Black Rod’s Entrance, and at the door to Westminster Hall. It is only through luck that none of them has led to any serious injuries or even fatalities. Operating on luck is absolutely no way to proceed. We would not be forgiven if one of those incidents had caused significant harm to a visitor or a member of staff.

There is an ongoing need for round-the-clock fire patrols, given that there have been 66 fire incidents in the Palace since 2008. That is why, by the way, I have undertaken my fire safety training for the building—and I would strongly encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to do likewise.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a very good point about the threat of fire. For a long time now, I have been arguing that we should get on and put in fire doors. I am delighted to see that they are now actually being put in. Can she see that they are now actually being put in? Can she confirm that all these long corridors, voids and spaces will at least be protected by fire doors? I would have thought that we could do a deal with English Heritage to get that past it. It is better that we are safe than that the place burns down because of the fears of English Heritage.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have taken enormous steps, at great expense, to try to put in place some temporary fire doors to protect this place. But of course he will also know that the way we keep our fire safety licence is by 24/7 patrols of people going around the Palace making sure that fires are not breaking out.

As I say, there have been 66 fire incidents in the Palace since 2008, and over the decades—

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Leader of the House mentions the issue of great expense. I know that this Bill is about the mechanisms and not the plans, but I am concerned that in building a temporary Chamber, we are building a white elephant without any purpose beyond 10 years. Will she look at alternative building techniques like those used in the 1960s and those used for the Olympics in 2012 for buildings that are built not for a 50-year life but for a shorter life, which would be much less expensive to the taxpayer?

Andrea Leadsom: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s contribution. She will understand that the House of Commons Commission looked very carefully at the options for a temporary decant, which could mean eight or even 10 years out of this place. She will also understand that, from a security point of view and from the cost-effectiveness point of view, the House of Commons Commission looked at the best combination of both those things. Temporary structures that are not possible to secure, and structures that are by their nature temporary and provide no legacy value, were also looked at carefully, but the decision that was taken to move to Richmond House provides permanent legacy value as well as the cheapest—or at least equally cheap—cost to the taxpayer.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Most people must be in favour of something happening, but I question the timing. There are many people in all our constituencies who are hungry and face destitution. How dare the Government bring forward a Bill before we are out of austerity and have made good those cuts in the living standards of the very poorest? Surely we should not be considering whether this fire door or that fire door works and whether the scheme is temporary until we are out of the age of austerity and have rewarded those who have paid most, which is the poor.

Andrea Leadsom: I have the greatest respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I completely understand his point. He will appreciate that the Palace of Westminster is in the state it is in precisely because Members have made those exact points for more than 150 years. The reality is that it is now costing us a fortune every single year to mend a building that is beyond patching and mending. Seizing this bull by the horns and doing something proactively about it is designed to give good value for taxpayers’ money, instead of what is happening now, which is spending more and more money to try to restore something while we sit here, which will be much more expensive to do.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): On the point about legacy value, would it not be better to have a Chamber that we could use for more constructive purposes? Rather than this adversarial approach, we could have a circular or semi-circular Chamber, with electronic voting facilities, so that we do not build in obsolescence, and we could then use it afterwards—for example, for citizens’ assemblies and other forums where we want to engage with the public.

Andrea Leadsom: I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that the purpose of the Bill is merely to establish a Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, which will give the best value for money against a professionally run project that seeks to restore the Palace of Westminster. The shape of the decant Chamber and parliamentary procedures for voting can be discussed any day of...
the week. All Members are encouraged to feed in their ideas and suggestions to the northern estate programme, which is separate from what we are talking about today, and I encourage her to do so.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Leader of the House will be aware that nine of the 10 poorest parts of northern Europe are within Britain. Are the British Government not missing an ideal opportunity to decentralise power and wealth away from London and the south-east by relocating this Parliament somewhere else in the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that has been made at various points over the many decades that we have been discussing this work. He will appreciate that Parliament is the home of our democracy. It is a vast building with two Chambers, all the Committee Rooms, all the offices and so on. Moving away from this Parliament permanently to another location would not only involve huge expense, but would require entirely relocating Government, because we in Parliament are within the whole Whitehall set-up, where the Government of the United Kingdom work. The costs would be utterly unbelievable.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I take my right hon. Friend back to the point made by hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) about the future use of Richmond House? It was not so many years ago that people were saying that all the Committee Rooms in Portcullis House were not really necessary, because we have plenty of Committee Rooms here in the Palace. Actually, they are necessary—they are used a lot, and demand exceeds supply. I think the same will be found with Richmond House: when it is given back, and we move back into this place, it will be well used by not only Parliament but the public.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly good point. In recognising the importance and the obligation of restoring the Palace of Westminster, we have to look at how the temporary decant, which is for eight to 10 years, can provide a legacy that we can use, that the public can use and that young people can use for Youth Parliament meetings. We can have parliamentary archives and permanent exhibitions, and as he says, Committee Rooms will be available for all-party parliamentary groups or for members of the public to visit their Parliament, so that we have much greater accessibility. Those should be the priorities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I will make a bit of progress and then take some more interventions.

Over the decades, there have been countless water leaks, floods, sewage leaks, and lighting and power outages, and these incidents are about much more than inconvenience. They demonstrate the rapidly deteriorating state of the Palace and the increasingly urgent need to act. The restoration of the Palace should have started literally decades ago, and the House authorities are now managing far too many serious risks, at great cost to the taxpayer. My concern is that the pace of deterioration is now much faster than our ability to patch and mend. Only last week, I went on a tour of the basement, and it is clear that the Palace is not fit for purpose in the 21st century. There are widespread mechanical and electrical faults. There are wi-fi issues that disrupt parliamentary business all day long, every day. Paint is peeling off the walls in the basement, revealing the asbestos that it was designed to conceal, at great risk to the health and safety of visitors and Members. There are 15,000 people who work in this place, and we have more than 1 million visitors a year. We have a duty to their health and safety.

There are many mice running freely through the cafés while people are eating. One has even taken up residence in my office and rustles around in my bin of an evening. There is no doubt: we need a cost-effective programme of work to restore one of the most famous buildings in the world and the home of our democracy.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I commend the Leader of the House for grasping this issue, which has been around for many years, and progressing it. Does she agree that it is important for Members to also engage in the northern estate programme, which is a precursor to the restoration and renewal programme? I draw the House’s attention to two sessions coming up on 11 June and 18 June. At the first, Members’ accommodation will be considered, and at the second, Members’ facilities will be considered. We want to hear from Members on that programme as well.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, who is the spokesman for the House Commission and has supported the work to get this Palace restored. He is right to point to the work under way on not only Richmond House as the temporary decant but the northern estate programme. Unfortunately, some of the other buildings used by Members require urgent upgrades to wiring, plumbing, air conditioning, bomb-proofing and so on. He is right to draw the House’s attention to the need for all Members to provide their feedback on our plans to upgrade those buildings.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for approaching this on a cross-party basis and the way she has engaged so far with the Finance Committee, of which I am a member. She is right to say that this is a moment of decision. We have had reviews, committees, commissions and reports. It is not a case of going back; it is about making a decision today. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) about austerity, but this is not about austerity or restoring this Palace. It is about ending austerity and dealing with this Palace. Is that not right?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman; he makes a very good point. We of course recognise the needs of the poorest in our society, and as a Government and a Parliament, we always seek to alleviate poverty, but this is a very significant issue. We want to preserve for future generations our historic building, which is a UNESCO world heritage site and the home of our democracy. Frankly, we have to work from somewhere, and this building is extraordinarily difficult and complex to review. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the Finance Committee.
[Andrea Leadsom]

This Parliament will have the opportunity to look at the outline business case, which will set out clearly the costs and deliverables during 2021, once we have established the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority in statute. I hope the House will agree to do that today, so that those bodies can get on with the work to ensure that we get the best value for taxpayers’ money.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My concern, putting on my hat as chair of the all-party group on archaeology, is not with what is in the Bill but with what is not in the Bill. The Leader of the House will be aware that when the underground car park was built some decades ago, proper archaeological conservation did not take place, and part of the old palace of Edward the Confessor was probably lost. Given the importance of the UNESCO world heritage site and the working democratic Parliament that this is, will she strengthen the Bill by taking on board the recommendations from Historic England about recognising “the need to conserve and sustain the outstanding architectural, archaeological and historical significance of the Palace of Westminster” in the Bill, so that travesties such as that cannot happen during the extensive work we now need to undertake?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s point. It did in fact come up during the pre-legislative scrutiny, which I am keen to come on to. The decision was taken that this should be a parliamentary project, and what the Government are seeking to do in bringing forward the Bill is merely to facilitate the will of Parliament. We are setting up a Sponsor Body, which will be made up of seven parliamentarians and five external members, so that it can establish a Delivery Authority. Those bodies—the Sponsor Body in consultation with parliamentarians, and the Delivery Authority in consultation with many external stakeholders—will be able to decide the best way to proceed. It was felt that putting restrictions and specific requirements in the Bill might tie the hands of the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority, and we were unwilling to do that. We want them to have the maximum ability to take things forward in the appropriate way, in consultation with all parliamentarians.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a case for extending the scope of the Bill to include the road network outside so that all works can be properly co-ordinated and we can avoid the situation we have now, with the road closed for non-essential roadworks when both Houses are sitting?

Andrea Leadsom: I think my right hon. Friend will be here when we come back to this place. He is extremely young, and I am sure he will still be around. Yes, it is in the Bill that this is the home of our Parliament and that we will certainly be back here.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Leader of the House is being very generous in giving way. I agree with much of what she has said. The Bill sets up the Delivery Authority and the Sponsor Body, and we are not going oppose that. She is also right that we need to work from somewhere, and of course we need value for money. May I ask her, however, whether she regrets not going back to look again at a new build in central London, which was of course the cheapest of all the options when the original assessments were done?

Andrea Leadsom: I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the House of Commons Commission. He certainly worked very closely with the other Commission members to consider the options available. I can say to him specifically that, since the appalling terror incident two years ago, a security review has been carried out, and it was very clear that parliamentarians, particularly elected Members of Parliament, need to be within the secure perimeter of the Palace at all times during the day, so for reasons of security as well as cost-effectiveness, the decision was taken to go with the Richmond House development.

I would now like to make a bit of progress, and particularly to address the fact that there are some who want to see this place become a museum. That would not of itself absolve us of our responsibility for restoration and renewal. The Palace is part of the UNESCO Westminster world heritage site. It is our obligation to maintain it, and the health and safety concerns of this Palace will need to be addressed regardless. Even if we were to move to a new permanent location, these works would still need doing. We cannot simply wash our hands of it. It is also worth remembering that when the Palace was finished in 1870—with debating Chambers, Lobbies, Committee Rooms and offices—it was purpose-built to serve as the home of Parliament. It would obviously be incredibly expensive permanently to relocate Parliament elsewhere. It would mean uprooting the Government Departments and agencies based around Westminster, and the cost of doing that would, frankly, be eye-watering. That is why the Government are committed to making progress with R and R, and why we have supported Parliament in bringing forward this Bill.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House actually done any assessment of the costs of relocating entire Government
Departments out of London? Wanting to relocate civil service jobs to other parts of the country has always been the Government policy, and surely that would be a good thing to do. Frankly, the whole country ends up with all its politics being far too London-focused, when we should be having far more of those jobs in other parts of the country. We would certainly love a lot of them in Yorkshire. I am concerned that she seems to be dismissing the idea of moving Government Departments to other parts of the country without actually having done any proper assessment of that.

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly disappointed to hear the right hon. Lady’s intervention. This Bill is about setting up a Sponsor Body and a Delivery Authority to restore the Palace of Westminster, which, as I have just said, we are obliged to do whether or not we stay here. There is always a considerable amount of work going on to assess and analyse the location of various different Government Departments and agencies right around the United Kingdom. Today, however, we are simply looking at the Second Reading of a Bill that enables us to undertake our legal duty to restore this Palace, whether or not we stay here. It is not for us to consider under this Bill the whole of government. I hope that all hon. Members will appreciate that we are seeking to facilitate Parliament’s decision that we must take very seriously our financial, fiduciary and cultural duties to this place.

The House was very clear in early 2018 that work needed to be taken forward to protect and preserve the heritage of the Palace. I want to pay tribute to the hard work of Members and staff who have got us to this place. In particular, I would like to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and her Committee, which undertook pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill; the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, which recommended that we decant; my predecessors as Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington); the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who eloquently made the case last year for a full decant; the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who agreed to support the Bill; and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who always speaks with such passion on this issue.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I have this horrible feeling that the Leader of the House is winding up or coming to the end, and I just want to raise the issue of planning. One of the biggest threats to the whole project is if the northern estate programme, which is essential to delivering R and R, ends up being delayed by lengthy judicial review or planning problems. The advice seems to have been given that if we include some kind of planning provision that brings planning into the Sponsor Body or the Delivery Authority, that will make this a hybrid Bill. However, the Olympics Bill was not a hybrid Bill, and that had a planning provision that was granted to the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, so why can we not do the same for this Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: I am only just warming up—I have hours to go. But the hon. Gentleman makes a serious point. The question whether to take planning into the Bill was certainly considered, but unlike the Olympic Delivery Authority, which I think had four or even five planning authorities to deal with, this project has one, and it was felt that working closely with the local planning authority would be the most effective way of enabling proper scrutiny while facilitating the Bill’s progress.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am taking my right hon. Friend at her word that she is not near the end of her speech. I thank her for her kind words, but I have not so far heard mention of accessibility for those with disabilities. The scrutiny Committee felt very strongly about that, not least because two members of the Committee themselves suffered from disability, and made us aware of just how inaccessible the present Parliament is for those who are visually or physically impaired.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes an absolutely vital point. First, in planning its consultation the Sponsor Body—as I have mentioned, made up of seven parliamentarians and five external members—will look very carefully at the report she has produced, but at the same time the Bill contains very clear provisions that specific focus on accessibility should be a core part of the work. However, we do not want to force too many strictures on the Sponsor Body, which will legitimately have a requirement to consult all Members and take their views into account before deciding who to consult further.

Tom Brake rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I want to make a bit of progress, then I will give way again.

I also want to acknowledge the right hon. and hon. Members who, like myself, arrived at this issue with a degree of scepticism, and have since carefully considered the issues that we face and concluded that the right decision, and the bold decision, is to take action before we run out of time. So the Bill’s Second Reading today, and its subsequent passage through both Houses, offers Parliament a unique opportunity to save this iconic and, to many, beloved building.

Since becoming Leader of the Commons, I have been determined to see the restoration project succeed. In early 2018, motions were brought before both Houses that gave the R and R programme its broad direction, with the House agreeing to a full decant over any of the other options. That moved the programme forward in the most substantial way to date, so the Sponsor Body, made up of seven parliamentarians and five external members, was established in shadow form in July 2018. It is currently taking forward the preparatory works needed. The draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill was published in October 2018, to enable the governance arrangements needed for the R and R project to be put in place, and a Joint Committee...
under the excellent chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden has undertaken diligent work in scrutinising the draft Bill. The Joint Committee reported on 21 March 2019 and we have taken on board many of its recommendations.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): In the report produced by the Committee that I served on, we suggested to the Government that there should be a nations and regions capital fund, to make this a truly UK-wide project. I believe that the Leader of the House will struggle to get the support of public opinion if this is another massive London-centric capital project, so will she agree to have another look at that proposal, which I put forward and which was accepted by the Committee?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the Joint Committee. As I said to him outside the Chamber, I will happily look at any proposal that he wants to put forward. Just to be very clear, however, the Palace of Westminster is a unique, world-famous building. It is owned by the people of the United Kingdom. It is not a London-centric project. It is one of the most visited and photographed buildings in the world, it has over a million visitors a year, and it is absolutely vital for the entire United Kingdom that we do not allow it to fall to rack and ruin.

I turn my attention to the Bill before the House. It is crucial in establishing the necessary governance arrangements to provide the capacity and capability to oversee and deliver the restoration and renewal of the Palace. Both Government and Parliament are determined to ensure that the R and R programme represents the best value for money for the taxpayer, and that will be a guiding principle as we take the Bill forward. It is imperative that Parliament keeps the costs down.

The Bill will put in place significantly more transparency and rigour around the funding of this programme. As a Government, we are working with Parliament to facilitate the right combination of checks and balances within the governance structure to properly deliver the programme. The Bill creates a Sponsor Body that will act as the client on behalf of Parliament, overseeing the delivery of the R and R programme. The Sponsor Body will form a Delivery Authority as a company limited by guarantee to manage and deliver the programme. The design of the governance arrangements in the Bill draws on best practice from the successful delivery of the London 2012 Olympics.

Tom Brake: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Andrea Leadsom: I shall make a bit more progress, if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

However, in formulating the governance arrangements, it has been essential that Parliament as the client has sufficient oversight of the programme. That is why the Bill also establishes how the works will be approved by Parliament. In particular, Parliament will be asked to approve the overall design, timeline and cost of the works, as well as the budget. The Government are determined that the work will deliver the best possible value for taxpayers’ money, so the Bill creates the Estimates Commission, which will be responsible for reviewing and laying before the House of Commons the Sponsor Body’s estimates of expenditure. It is through these annual estimates that the programme will be funded, and approved by Members of Parliament. In addition, the Bill puts in place a number of financial controls. They include requiring the Estimates Commission to consult HM Treasury on the annual estimates for the funding of the R and R programme, and to have regard to any subsequent advice that it gives.

We are confident that the arrangements being put in place will deliver the necessary restoration works, and at the same time protect public money.

Tom Brake: The Leader of the House has referred a number of times to the Olympics, which has some similarities to this project. One reason why that project was so successful was that Tessa Jowell did a fantastic job of engaging all the Opposition parties, securing their agreement. Now the Leader of the House is engaging in the same process but, as I understand it, there is about to be a leadership contest in her party. Clearly, if she becomes leader, she will be committed to this project. Has she secured the support of all the other potential leaders of her party, to ensure that the project can reach completion in 2031 or thereabouts?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because of course this project is a parliamentary project; it is not a project for Government. Very specifically, I have taken steps to ensure that the Bill will succeed any changes of leadership, any changes of Government, so that we will be back in here in the 2030s, under the sponsorship and leadership of Parliament as a House. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Consultation—cross-party, cross-House—is absolutely key to the success of this project, because there is no doubt that by the mid-2030s, even the next leader of the Conservative party may still not be around.

Stewart Hosie: I thank the Leader of the House for what she said about estimates being laid, so that at least there will be clarity about how much we intend to spend. However, she will be aware of the difficulty debating the current estimates, when we can talk about anything except for the actual estimate. May we have an assurance that when these estimates are laid, we will be able to discuss the actual sums of money, not simply what they will be spent on?

Andrea Leadsom: I think I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. In essence, the Estimates Commission will be made up of parliamentarians, with lay member support, and those estimates will be laid before the House of Commons for debate and approval, with commentary from HM Treasury. Also, the hon. Gentleman should remember that the outline business case, which will be the initial proposal for deliverables and costs, will come before Parliament for it to vote on, and that should take place during 2021. I think I can give the
hon. Gentleman the assurance that this House will have the opportunity to vote on, and debate, the finances; but I will perhaps provide him with further advice on that outside the Chamber, so that I can understand exactly the point that he is trying to solve.

Sir Edward Leigh: Very briefly, as a correction to the point that has just been made, following a recommendation from the Procedure Committee—again, following a long campaign—we do now discuss estimates on estimates days, so that point is not accurate and we can deal with this during estimates days.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, but I will still respond to the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) specifically on his point.

Chris Bryant: Several times, the Leader of the House has referred to the seven parliamentarians who will be on the Sponsor Body, but the Bill says no fewer than four and no more than eight. The Joint Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) suggested that they should be elected Members. Should there not be more Members of the House of Commons than Members of the House of Lords, and would it not be a good idea for them to be elected?

Andrea Leadsom: This is a matter for the House to decide. I am talking about seven parliamentarians, because that is what is currently on the shadow Sponsor Body. It is, of course, for the House to make such decisions. The parties put forward their nominees, and that is the reason there are four peers and three Members of this House. This is precisely a very good example of where it is for the House to decide what structure it wants. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a bit more progress.

The Bill is not simply about restoring an old building in an urgent state of disrepair. This is about the ambition we have for a 21st century Parliament, which is more family-friendly and a truly modern workplace. The work we are undertaking provides Parliament with the opportunity to consider the daily working of the Palace. It is clear that as part of R and R it would temporarily leave R. In passing the motions in early 2018, Parliament was agreed that that part of R and R would temporarily leave the Palace, so that the restoration and renewal work can be done more quickly and more cheaply.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): One concern people have expressed to me, and which we all have concerns about, is mission creep. Will the Leader of the House explain clearly how she sees the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority ensuring that once the case is set, future generations do not add in bells and whistles that will cost a lot more?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can assure the hon. Lady that the outline business case will be the project outline. The Estimates Commission will lay the annual estimates to the House for it to reject or approve. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady’s Public Accounts Committee and others, including the National Audit Office, will want to look very carefully at value for money and to ensure that there has not been scope creep. I absolutely accept the point she makes. This is a parliamentary project, so a very important feature will be that Members accept and respect the fact that we are seeking to restore this place at the best possible value for taxpayers’ money.

The work on the decant of the House of Commons is at present led by the House authorities and is not the responsibility of the Sponsor Body. I know that many of those who are engaged with the programme already, through visiting the booth in Portcullis House and reading the consultation strategy, will have had their own views and made them known. I have heard plenty of positive comments about the innovative and modern plans for the temporary Chamber, but there may well be something specific that Members would like to see. I therefore hope that everybody will feed their ideas and views into the consultation on the plans for the temporary Chamber and for the northern estate project.

I want to point out that the redeveloped Richmond House will provide a number of potential legacy benefits, the first of which relates to business resilience. All major organisations require a contingency plan. The works to Richmond House will provide a more robust future resilience plan, making sure that Parliament is prepared for business continuity, should it ever be needed, outside the Palace. Secondly, there is no doubt that it will improve the experience of the more than 1 million visitors to the parliamentary estate each year. The replica Chamber could become a hub for educational facilities, where schoolchildren could learn at first hand how Parliament works and could hold regular debates. It could become a home for the Parliamentary Archives, and it could be a location for major parliamentary and other exhibitions. The views of Members will be very welcome.
Thirdly, Richmond House is well placed in terms of security. The Murphy review, following the tragic murder of PC Keith Palmer in 2017, brought home the need for a fully secure perimeter around the Palace. Richmond House is the only option for decant within that secure perimeter. I encourage all Members to provide their views during the consultation on Richmond House, which is currently under way. However, I want to remind Members that the Bill before the House today is not concerned with where we will go while the works take place; it solely puts in place governance arrangements in order to deliver the vital works to the Palace at the best value to taxpayers.

To conclude, the time for patching and mending this place has come to an end. Those of us who are fully aware of the speed of deterioration of the Palace know that the sensible and decisive option is to facilitate a full restoration project. The choice before the House is to preserve the Palace of Westminster as the home of the UK Parliament for future generations or to keep risking a catastrophic failure, which I believe would be an undeniable dereliction of duty. I look forward to hearing today’s contributions, and I commend the Bill to the House.

2.17 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I start by offering the House the apologies of the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz)? She has a long-standing personal commitment and has asked me to step in. I hope I can be an adequate substitute for her—as always, I shall at least do my best.

I pay tribute to the Leader of the House for her excellent introduction to the Bill. My understanding is that over the past few months she has brought together Members from right across the House, in what has been a very difficult process. She has managed to find consensus, and I pay tribute to her for that.

In opening the debate on behalf of the Opposition I should say that we are pleased to support the Bill, which has followed a long process of assessing and reviewing the state of the Palace of Westminster and of determining how best to proceed.

The House debated and voted on restoration and renewal on 31 January 2018, and the House agreed that the Palace of Westminster is in need of restoration and renewal. Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that there are structural, mechanical, electrical, fire safety, telecoms and asbestos issues in the Palace of Westminster that need to be resolved. Perhaps I may take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to thank the staff and the fire officers who have managed to keep the show on the road through numerous difficult crises, which the Leader of the House outlined.

To protect Parliament from the possibility of irreversible damage, it is vital that the R and R process starts. The Leader of the House referred to the tragedy of Notre Dame, but it is worth reminding ourselves that this very Palace itself was born out of destruction by fire in Victorian times—there is historical precedent for taking these measures now.

By 234 votes to 185, the resolution required that “immediate steps be taken” to establish a shadow Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, and that their “statutory successors” be established by legislation in due course. The House of Lords approved on 6 February last year a resolution in identical terms, and this is the Bill we are debating today.

I thank everyone involved in drafting the Bill. It gives effect to the resolutions voted for by Parliament last year and seeks to establish the statutory bodies that will be responsible for the restoration and renewal works in the parliamentary estate. It establishes the governance structure within which the bodies will operate. They will be able 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.

With the establishment of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, the Sponsor Body will have overall responsibility for the restoration and renewal programme, act as a single client on behalf of both Houses and be empowered to 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. This two-tier approach, which, as we have heard, was used in the successful London Olympics project, is the best structure to deliver a value-for-money programme that commands the confidence of taxpayers and parliamentarians and is accountable to them. The costs of the project are of concern to all parliamentarians and the public.

Sir Edward Leigh: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the points made by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The hon. Gentleman’s party has campaigned long and hard on austerity, quite understandably. Of course we have to make this building safe, but does he not think that it might go down rather badly in Labour heartlands that we are spending huge amounts of money on building a permanent replica Chamber, which will be a white elephant, when there are cheaper options for a temporary structure?

Christian Matheson: I thought that the Leader of the House answered that fairly during her speech; there will never be a right time to do this. I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman has been recruited to join those of us who oppose the Government’s austerity policies. I look forward to his joining us in the next Opposition day debate, whenever the Leader of the House grants us one. I have to say, though, that today is not the day for making partisan comments attacking the Government’s austerity programme.

We have kicked the can down the road for too long. As a result, I worry that costs are higher than they would have been if the job had been done previously. As the Leader of the House said, we now have to grab the bull by the horns, and her position has my support.

It is important that the programme provides value for money, but it is also right that we remember that this is one of the most historic and iconic buildings in the world and that preserving that history will come at a cost. The Bill establishes a Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission. The Estimates Commission will lay the Sponsor Body’s estimates before Parliament and play a role in reviewing the Sponsor Body’s expenditure. Crucially, if the anticipated final cost exceeds the amount of funds allocated for the works, the Estimates Commission can reject the estimate and require the Sponsor Body to prepare a new one.
A Joint Committee, chaired by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who is in her place, recommended the draft Bill, which was published on 18 October 2018. My thanks go to the Committee for the thorough way in which it has scrutinised the draft Bill and made recommendations. I find myself again paying tribute in particular to the right hon. Lady for her leadership in that work.

The Joint Committee published its report on 21 March, which concluded that

“the basic structure of governance proposed by the draft Bill is the correct one.”

The Government response was published on 7 May, but they have not accepted key recommendations of the Joint Committee’s report. One of the recommendations was that

“a Treasury Minister should be an additional member of the Sponsor Body”— which it said would

“underpin the hierarchy of decision making”

and

“provide clarity to those delivering the project”.

The Government did not accept that proposal and insisted on

“a fundamental role for HM Treasury in being consulted on the annual estimates for the funding of the...programme.”

In our view, that extra person—the Minister—could be an ad hoc member of the Sponsor Body, attending when necessary, and would equalise the number of MPs and peers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) pointed out, peers have an extra place.

Neil Gray: The Opposition spokesperson is making a good speech. One of the reasons some of my colleagues on the Committee and I were so keen to insert that line into the report was that part of the success of the Olympic project was that Government bought into and were right behind it. At the moment, the Leader of the House referred to education in her opening speech. The Joint Committee said that the Sponsor Body should

“take account of ‘the need’ rather than ‘the desirability’ of ensuring educational and other facilities are provided in the restored Palace.”

But in their response, the Government instead raised

“the need for the R&R programme to deliver good value for money.”

The Government mentioned “cost” and “value for money” 13 times each in their 29-page response. Although it is important to keep costs in check, it is concerning that the Bill does not mandate the refurbishment of education facilities and the creation of new outreach spaces. Everyone should take pride in Parliament’s enduring legacy for education, and young people especially gain a tremendous amount from Parliament’s Education Service, which serves to inform, engage and empower young people to understand and get involved in Parliament, politics and democracy.

The education centre in Victoria Tower Gardens has been a massive success, as have the outreach services. Indeed, it was my great pleasure, just this morning, that children from Blue Coat Primary School in Chester were visiting the Palace of Westminster and taking advantage of the educational facilities. The education centre and its facilities and facilitators should have a secured future both during the works on the northern estate and in the Queen Elizabeth conference centre, where the House of Lords will be, and after the works are completed. Education about Parliament and democracy cannot be interrupted.

Meg Hillier: I had the pleasure of visiting Montenegro, where 50% of all primary school children go through its education centre. Obviously, with a slightly different history, they need to learn about democracy. Does my hon. Friend agree that because the education centre is a temporary building, we need a long-term solution for that, and that some of the works at Richmond House could plug that gap?

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. I had not realised until recently that it was only a temporary building. It has become such an important and integral part of Parliament’s work, and her suggestion is well made and I hope will be well listened to.

Let me turn to environmental sustainability. I was delighted that Parliament recently passed the Labour party’s historic motion declaring a climate emergency. It is important to consider the environmental impact of the restoration and renewal works. Designs for the buildings incorporated into the northern estate programme, and those being planned for restoration and renewal, emphasise the high efficiency of equipment and operational energy use and electricity as the principal power source, based on projections of future grid decarbonisation.

The Committee on Climate Change’s report, “Net Zero—The UK’s contribution to stopping global warming”, recommends an emissions target of net zero greenhouse gases by 2050, and Parliament has a plan for that. I understand that within the necessary constraints of
heritage and conservation planning the refurbishment will support the energy efficiency of the buildings involved, using more energy-efficient building fabrics, including, where feasible, in the Palace of Westminster. However, environmental sustainability must now be locked into the heart of every decision we make.

The illegal practice of blacklisting is an issue that hon. Members have raised in the House, as have I. I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a member of and have gratefully received support from the Unite and GMB trade unions. While this is a matter for the Delivery Authority, we must remember that the practice of blacklisting is illegal and has caused untold harm to people’s lives. We have a wonderful opportunity to invest in people’s futures by upskilling them. We can harness the current skills of specialists from around the UK and train and encourage more young people, especially women, into this area. We must also send out the clear message that this is a prestigious project and that companies that have been involved in blacklisting construction workers will not be welcome to submit bids. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support this position.

**Tom Brake:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on blacklisting. He raises the matter with me regularly. Does he agree that investment in skills must be a priority if the UK is not to need to import a lot of people, probably from the EU, to work on things as varied as the carvings, the masonry and the windows? If we do not invest in skills now, those people will simply not be there.

**Christian Matheson:** I absolutely agree. I hope we can also see this as an opportunity to train people in situ during the project, but someone has to do the training itself, so we will certainly have to upskill our people.

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, a lot of work is going on and firms are doing exactly that—bringing in apprentices and training them in specialties. I know that because one of the major firms is in my constituency.

**Christian Matheson:** It is great to hear that from the hon. Gentleman. I will come to the question of spreading the work around in a moment—the question that the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) raised—but I am most grateful for that intervention.

Sadly, blacklisting is still rife in the construction sector. There are experienced construction workers and others in associated trades who cannot find work today or who are given a job offer only to find it withdrawn without explanation a couple of days later. Blacklisting wrecks lives, careers and families and damages workplace health and safety. When McAlpine was given the Elizabeth Tower and Big Ben contract, it caused consternation because it had been up to its neck in blacklisting. Many large construction companies were part of the cabal of firms associated with the Consulting Association and faced legal action from trade unions on behalf of the blacklisted members. Numerous of those have now admitted their culpability and paid into a compensation scheme, but several others have failed to do so. I shall press the simple case that any construction company that has been found to be associated with blacklisting workers and failed to accept its wrongdoing and compensate workers for that treatment should be publicly excluded from bidding for these prestigious contracts. This is a chance for Parliament to express its opposition to the terrible practice of blacklisting, and we should embrace that chance.

It is incumbent on the Sponsor Body to ensure that all areas of the country benefit from this programme. London benefits from having Parliament physically located here, so the delivery body must ensure that work is fairly shared out across the country—a point that the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts made in an intervention on the Leader of the House. I am proud that Donald Insall Associates, the country’s leading heritage architectural firm, based in my constituency and led by Tony Barton, is already working as conservation architect on the restoration and renewal project for the Palace and is advising on the northern estate. We must ensure that businesses small and large from across the UK have similar opportunities.

Finally, there are many ways in which we can respect the heritage of Parliament and replicate it while modernising it and making it accessible to everyone. This is a diverse nation and people have different needs. There are many people with disabilities that are not overtly visible. We need to be imaginative in working out how this place can be accessible—for example, to those with autism. We are told the noise in Portcullis House often reaches very high levels, and this has perhaps not been taken into account previously, although it was referred to earlier by the right hon. Member for Meriden.

Hon. Members have made various contributions to the consultation. I am told that my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), who has worked hard on bringing the idea of mindfulness to hon. Members and their staff, has asked that hon. Members and their staff benefit from a meditation room. These are ways of introducing new ways of working to an historic building.

In conclusion, we have a duty to protect this heritage building and world UNESCO site, and the restoration and renewal project will make this a more modern and compliant place to work with better access facilities for everyone. We can get this right, after so many years of kicking the can down the road, so that this place is fit for future generations.

2.34 pm

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): The fire at Notre Dame was a stark warning that historic buildings are incredibly vulnerable to catastrophic damage, either from failure to repair them in a timely fashion or indeed during repair itself, although, to be fair to the Government, they had decided before that awful tragedy to get cracking on this project. It is important for this generation of MPs to note that this should have been started many decades ago. For the benefit of members of the public, some of whom are watching in the Gallery, I should explain that the difficulty for parliamentarians in starting this project has been that it is difficult at any time for us to argue the case for spending money on our place of work. This is not any old place of work; however, it is a world heritage site, and this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to restore it and renew it—two words of equal importance.
I was honoured to be asked to chair the draft legislative Committee on the Bill and was blessed in the composition of its membership. Its members were very knowledgeable and a pleasure to work with, some of them providing continuity, having come from other Committees that had already worked on the project, meaning we did not just reinvent the wheel.

What caused me most concern was the length of time before Parliament could decant and work begin in earnest. It was on 1 February 2018 that Parliament voted in favour of a total decant. It came as a shock to the Committee, however, when initially we heard that the decant might be delayed until at least late 2028, which would be a full decade after parliamentarians took the decision to get out completely to make sure the work could be done most cost-effectively. Our concern is whether the buildings can function sustainably for the length of time it will take to decant.

Meg Hillier rose—

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am willing to decant.

Meg Hillier: I think we are all willing to decant, so that is good news. I thank the right hon. Lady for her chairmanship of the Committee, whose work was concluded with dispatch but thoroughness. She will be glad to know, hot off the press, that the Public Accounts Committee has received a letter from the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence that should speed up our departure because we have now, I hope, resolved the issue of the MOD car park.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes, I was very pleased to hear that news hot off the press. It is very significant. For the benefit of others hon. Members, I should explain that the potential hold-up caused by our not being able to access the car park belonging to the MOD could have added three years to the project and resulted in an estimated additional cost of £350 million. I am delighted that common sense has prevailed. None the less, that still means, on the evidence the Committee was given, that we cannot decant until 2025, which is six years hence.

As the Leader of the House said, there have already been some near misses, with falling masonry and leaks—including one in this Chamber that interrupted proceedings. As a working environment, it is far from ideal for the staff, who outnumber parliamentarians in this place and often spend more days per year in Parliament grappling with the practical difficulties of a building that is deteriorating—quite apart from the rather depressing impact of working somewhere that feels like a building site.

For visitors, the experience is also unsatisfactory as large parts of the buildings are covered in scaffolding and hoardings that make them inaccessible and, as I hear many tourists commenting, unattractive to photograph when people have come all the way to do just that.

As I said earlier, the members of the Committee included parliamentarians with disabilities. I am sure that Lord Blunkett and Lord Stunell will not mind—I have already spoken to them about this—if I pay tribute to the way in which they made us aware just how difficult it is to work in this place. We have practical experience of that, having moved from Committee Room to Committee Room for our hearings. There are hearing loops in some of those rooms, but we found in practice that when a loop was switched on for a hearing-impaired member of the Committee, the microphones went off. Even for those who do not, as far as we know, have any hearing difficulties, it was at times very difficult to hear the evidence that was being presented. Such barriers to the ability to work in a place that requires everyone to be able to access it put people off working here, serving here, and putting their names forward as parliamentary candidates. As we restore and also renew Parliament, we must make really sure that those barriers are removed.

The inaccessibility of the building to those with disabilities is a wrong that urgently needs to be put right, and it must be addressed during the decant. I am talking not about the building that we will eventually have, but the temporary building. Beyond that, however, we need to give expression in this legislation to the public’s desire to be better served by their Parliament. To that end, there needs to be extensive consultation. That will be part of the role of the Sponsor Body, but it has not escaped us as parliamentarians—and this is, as much as anything, for the benefit of the public—that MPs are not in good odour in the country, and the work of Parliament is coming in for a lot of criticism. People have views on how they want to see Parliament working better. There is no better opportunity than this project for us to consult them on the kind of changes that they want, and, as far as possible, to determine how we can deliver them.

The main reason for the delay is the chosen plan for the decanting of Parliament to a replacement building on the site of the present Richmond House. Because Richmond House is a listed building, it will be more difficult to demolish and rebuild it under planning law. The Committee took the view—which I am sure was correct—that under the Bill as it stands, Parliament is not taking separate planning powers to itself for this purpose, but will be subject to the same planning regime as everyone else. We were told, however, that the demolition and rebuilding of Richmond House would cause some delays, as there would inevitably be strong objections from those who value its heritage. This is not a “ready to roll” solution. The decant to Richmond House also requires some of the footprint of what is known as the northern estate, which is presently undergoing refurbishment and will not be available for some time. I am glad that the Government have accepted the Committee’s recommendation for the “rolling together” of those who are overseeing those repairs with the Sponsor Body, because that would surely optimise our ability to complete the work at speed.

In the light of the Notre Dame fire, I urge the parliamentary authorities to review the list of decant options that they discarded before deciding on the demolition and rebuilding of Richmond House. As I have said, it is not a “ready to roll” option. I appreciate that a primary reason for its selection was the security of all who visit and work on the parliamentary estate, and I am very grateful for that concern for our lives. However, other buildings in the vicinity are considered secure enough to host international conventions with high-profile participants, and all the options still require staff, parliamentarians and visitors to walk to and from the site of the parliamentary decant building in any event. That security risk cannot be avoided. The Committee was concerned by the implicit view that the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre is deemed safe enough for peers to use, but not MPs. I found that distinction between categories of parliamentarian rather strange.
As the Second Church Estates Commissioner, I wrote to the Leader of the House asking why Church House had been rejected as a decant option, given that it had been the default decant option for 40 years and had set an historical precedent, having been used by Churchill as Prime Minister during the second world war to decant both Houses at different times. I have a simple way of approaching the issue: if Church House was good enough for Churchill, it ought to be good enough for us. Moreover, Churchill was kind enough to oversee the installation of a bomb-proof roof over the Chamber and a blast wall around it. However, I am no security expert, and I must acknowledge that the security threats that we face in the modern age may be subtly different from those that were experienced during world war two.

May I ask the Leader of the House to think once more about the options that might enable us to decant more swiftly? Let me also correct a possible misapprehension. When I wrote to her, I was envisaging not a temporary building in Dean’s Yard, but a straight swap between the whole of Church House—which has room for 460 employees—and Richmond House. I have another addendum: when we decant, can we please ensure that we still have the chapel facility that we currently enjoy in the Undercroft?

I am grateful for the acceptance of a number of the Committee’s recommendations, including the recommendation for the merging of the present works committee on the northern estate with the Sponsor Body proposed in the Bill. That is good, and may help to accelerate the project. However, we also recommended that a Treasury Minister should be appointed to the Sponsor Body, because it is taxpayers’ money that will be used, and the Treasury will have every interest in keeping an eye on the costs and value for money of the project. Today I received a letter on that subject from the Prime Minister, and I think it is worth sharing her response with the House. She points out that there are “financial safeguards” in the Bill, and adds:

“This includes a fundamental role for HM Treasury in being consulted on the annual estimates for the funding of the R& R. As part of this process—this is the important bit—any comments made by HM Treasury on the annual estimate must be laid before Parliament.”

So we shall be able to see the Treasury’s response, but we must be able to debate it as well. I should be happy to hear the Leader of the House confirm that later.

I think that a political figurehead will be needed to answer questions in the House, after the model of the late Dame Tessa Jowell, whom we will eternally remember with gratitude for the success of the Olympics. Its owner told me proudly that it had produced one of the features that helped to make the buildings in the Olympic Park more sustainable. That had the knock-on effect of creating and sustaining jobs in the business, and it meant that people benefited well beyond the environs of Westminster. This project must do exactly the same, and—as the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) pointed out—it must offer apprenticeship opportunities to both men and women, so that part of the legacy is an increase in the number of people with the skills that are needed to restore heritage assets throughout the UK. Those skills are currently in short supply.

The Committee also received evidence from Historic England, which asked us to amend the Bill to make specific reference to heritage. Parliament is a world heritage site so the need to conserve the outstanding architectural, archaeological and historical Palace of Westminster should be explicit. I believe this is crucial because, as Historic England points out, heritage conservation should be within the scope of sustainable development which underpins the planning system. It is not about preserving this place as a museum; it is about making sure that its unique historical significance has a sustainable future. The Government agreed to give this further detailed consideration.

The Church of England has to balance the twin demands of heritage and future sustainability all the time. People are often unaware of how we make cathedrals more sustainable with solar panels on the roof—which people cannot see—and renewable energy features that help to make the buildings in the Olympic Park more sustainable. That had the knock-on effect of creating and sustaining jobs in the business, and it meant that people benefited well beyond the environs of Westminster. That helped to make the buildings in the Olympic Park more sustainable. That had the knock-on effect of creating and sustaining jobs in the business, and it meant that people benefited well beyond the environs of Westminster.

The Government are to be congratulated on grasping the nettle where previous cohorts of politicians shrank from the task, and I hope the Bill, as amended, will be passed speedily through both Houses to get a long overdue project under way.

The evidence given by the head of the church buildings division of the Church of England to the Committee urged Parliament to become what he called an “intelligent client” by asking hard questions in timely fashion and being disciplined about not interfering with the project in ways that lengthen it and add cost unnecessarily. I encourage all Members to heed this advice as the restoration and renewal of these great buildings gets under way. Most of us are, I think, unlikely still to be here when the project completes but this should reinforce our efforts to get it absolutely right for future generations so that we can answer any future criticism and say that we gave this our very best endeavours.

The Government are to be congratulated on grasping the nettle where previous cohorts of politicians shrank from the task, and I hope the Bill, as amended, will be passed speedily through both Houses to get a long overdue project under way.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Of all the things this House can do to endear itself to the good people of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,
spending billions of pounds on renovating the place where we, the Members of Parliament, do our work probably, just about, would not make the top 10. In these days of austerity and with us still going through all the horrors and psychodramas of this crazy Tory Brexit it almost seems like it is designed to intentionally wind up the good people of this country. So I sincerely wish this House all the very best in trying to sell this to a sceptical and, frankly, had-enough nation.

Meg Hillier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I have barely started, but I will give way given that the hon. Lady is Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman is critical of spending money on the UK Parliament so it amuses me that there are colleagues of all of ours up the road, as he would say, in a wonderful, splendid modern Parliament building that cost the taxpayer quite a lot of money.

Pete Wishart: I will say two things to the hon. Lady. / Interruption. / She is already hearing a chorus on one of them: it cost less than Portcullis House. And if she wants to know about the difficulties in designing a Parliament and creating a Parliament she only needs to look at the experience of the Scottish Parliament. That was one of the first pieces of work that the Scottish Parliament went into, and I can tell the hon. Lady that it was not particularly easy; there was real discontent about it. That is what this House and Members will experience; that is what they have got to look forward to, because they will have to try to sell this to a sceptical nation, and I wish them all the very best.

On that, let me declare an interest—or maybe a disinterest. Me and my colleagues do not intend to be here at the end of the process.

Meg Hillier: Labour gains.

Pete Wishart: I was going to tell a few jokes in my speech, but I think we have heard the funniest one already: the idea of the Labour party gaining any seats from the Scottish National party is the best joke we will hear.

Let me declare my disinterest: me and my SNP colleagues are not going to be here. We are probably not even going to be here at the commencement of the project given its tortuous progress. So we will let other Members get on with their vital restoration and renewal work while we get down to the business of restoring and renewing our beautiful country in the shape of the priorities of the Scottish people.

I like the fact that those in charge of this call it restoration and renewal—R and R. Who doesn’t like a bit of R and R? Everybody likes that. If they called it the restoring of a Parliament for the Members of Parliament of this country I am sure they would have a few more difficulties in trying to explain that to the people of this country. And good luck to them in defending the £4 billion to £6 billion that they will have to spend on restoring and renewing this place.

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend may recall that when the National Assembly for Wales had a new building the cost was £60 million, and the Conservative party in particular ran a full-scale campaign against that expenditure, yet it seems very relaxed about spending well over £5 billion on this Parliament.

Pete Wishart: I have to say very candidly to my hon. Friend that I have given up trying to second-guess what this Conservative party says about anything when it comes to spending in this country.

I think the people of the United Kingdom will now be trying to figure out how many schools and hospitals £4 billion to £6 billion could build, and I am pretty certain that all other Members will be reminded of that right up until their posteriors return to these restored and renewed green Benches.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: Of course I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir Edward Leigh: Just so the hon. Gentleman knows, I agree with him: every £100 million we spend on this permanent replica Chamber is £100 million less for teachers and doctors and nurses and all the rest. I just want the hon. Gentleman to know that I am fully on his side.

Pete Wishart: It is always curious what we pick up in the way of allies when we are going through particular issues and projects. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that additional comment.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It just so happens, as I will touch on in my own contribution, that I was on the Holyrood progress group, which was in charge of building the Scottish Parliament building, and I can remember the sound and the fury and the brickbats that came my way, John Home Robertson’s way and Linda Fabiani’s way as we proceeded with the project, yet I am bound to say this: I think my SNP friends will agree that now that the building is finished Scotland is extremely proud of it and nobody mentions the price any more—and I for one am proud to have been involved in building such a landmark in Scotland’s history.

Pete Wishart: I am tempted to say, “So it’s all his fault then,” but I will not do that—and I stress that I only said that in jest before the hon. Gentleman gets all shouty. He is absolutely right: the Scottish Parliament had a tortuous progress, and I commend the hon. Gentleman because I know he served on that group with distinction and hard work, and that project was down to those people who designed all of that. We should not forget, however, the fuss that was created for a very modest building that cost less than Portcullis House.

We are talking about something that it is said will cost £4 billion to £6 billion, but nobody actually believes it will cost that; it is never going to cost £4 billion. Most people suspect that that figure will come in at closer to £10 billion or £12 billion, and that is before we even find out all the different things that will be underneath as we start to dig under. We have already heard about Edward the Confessor; that was just in the car park of this building. Goodness knows what else will be discovered and the archaeological programmes that will be undertaken. So I salute the other Members of this House in their bold and courageous move and look forward to them selling this to the people of this nation; and from afar we will be watching and wishing them all the best as they get down to restoring and renewing this building.
But I agree that this building is falling down and becoming a hazard to all those who work here. Decades of neglect and indecision have seen to that. Anybody who stands still for a moment in this place now stands a very good chance of being hit by falling masonry. It is so overrun with vermin that even the mice in this place now wear overalls. Because of decades of prevarication this building is practically falling down. The failure of successive Governments to face up to their responsibilities means we now have a building that could face a catastrophic failure or massive fire at any time.

Everyone has drawn the comparisons with Notre Dame and that is right. The Leader of the House has given that example in her many comments on this; she has said the example of Notre Dame shows why this is now imperative. But there are key differences between this House and the cathedral on the Seine: one is a building where people think they speak to God and the other is Notre Dame cathedral.

It will probably not come as a great surprise to learn that me and my SNP colleagues do not share the same dewy-eyed affection and nostalgia that some Members feel towards this place. I have to say that I personally love this building. It is a truly iconic building, and it is a real pleasure and privilege to work in it; walking down Victoria Street to work I feel a sense of pride that I am coming to work in what is a fantastic building. But I have to say that I could probably just about discharge my responsibilities as a Member of Parliament from somewhere else.

This is a beautiful building, but it comes with particular historical baggage. It was very much associated with a height of empire when it was built, and with some of the worst excesses of global imperialism, which we have to concede was a feature of the 19th century United Kingdom. It is a building that is ingrained with 19th-century power relationships, and with a historical cap-doffing, forelock-tugging culture. We even have one part of the building where we refer to people as lords and ladies, and we actually think that is okay! What type of building is this that creates this kind of culture? If we are serious about being a new, modern 21st-century Parliament, we should have a building that reflects these new ambitions and aspirations. We should not be trying to shoehorn Parliament into a mock-Gothic Victorian tourist attraction. Why are we not thinking properly about this?

Andrea Leadson: I always love the hon. Gentleman’s banter, but I must gently point out to him that the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) is a member of the House of Commons Commission, and I remember feisty discussions in which I was worrying about the value for money for taxpayers and the hon. Member for Dundee East was insisting that the money must be spent and that we had to get on with the project. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is a member of that commission. Let me make it clear that we are all for moving out of this place—of course we are. We have to move out. It would be ridiculous to try to stay in a place that is practically falling down and that is infested with vermin. It is no place for our visitors to come to and it is imperative that we should move.

I am coming on to talk about what I think we should be moving out to, and what we should do to ensure that we get value for money, because that is the key feature in our discussions today. We know that this very technical and mechanical Bill provides for the governance of the project, but it is very much caught up in the whole idea of how we present a modern Parliament in the future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right to say that no one is arguing against spending any money whatsoever. This is about achieving value for money and doing the right thing. Let us look at the new Scottish Parliament, with its new, modern Chamber that is accessible to everyone; it has electronic voting and even has normal daylight coming in. That is what that money was spent on. What is being proposed here is simply to do everything up but keep it exactly the same, even though it is not fit for purpose.

Pete Wishart: That is the key point. Why are we taking this place apart, only to reassemble it in the same way and do the same old bad things in the same old venue? It is so unimaginative. Whoever presented this idea really must have been up all night thinking about it, mustn’t they? “Let’s just come back to the same place that we are going to be leaving! And when we leave this place temporarily, let’s just create a carbon copy for us to use before we come back to this place!” That makes absolutely no sense.

When I look around this building, I get a sense that it is a sad metaphor for Brexit Britain. It is dilapidated, falling to bits around our ears and unloved, and it could go up in flames at any minute. Is that not a truly fantastic representation of the Brexit Britain that we are heading towards? Perhaps this Parliament and this building are exactly what this country deserves. The Leader of the House is right to say that we have to move out, for the sake of the thousands of people who work here and the many visitors who come here. It is for them that we must move out, but to move out simply to come back to the same building, with all its cultural and historical trappings, is a serious mistake.

It is a real pity that we were not listened to when we were going through all these Committees, when we proposed selling this building off to the private sector. People would be queuing up and biting our arm off to get hold of a place like this. It is a UNESCO site and one of the most iconic buildings in the world. They would be fighting each other to get their hands on it. Selling it off to the private sector would obviously save us billions of pounds on the redevelopment costs. We could then move out to a new building that would meet our requirements as a modern 21st-century democracy. It would meet all the security arrangements that we obviously need, and it would actually accommodate all 650 Members, which is more than can be said for this place. Why was this not thought about seriously? I think it is a huge deficiency that that was not done. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts
(Neil Gray) tried to ensure that that proposal was properly considered in the Committee, but it was not even given the time of day. The House has definitely let the country down by not considering it.

Let us imagine what would happen if we did sell this place off. I would like to see it become a museum to British democracy, where people could come and be amused by how Members of Parliament behaved and did their business in the early 21st century, braying like perfidious donkeys on speed to show their approval because they are not allowed to clap, and wandering around in circles for hour after hour just to register their decisions on what happens in this place. People would laugh out loud at the fact that Members referred to themselves as “honourable” and “right honourable”.

I can just imagine the joy and amusement that would be brought to visitors from around the world who came to a museum of British democracy here in the House of Commons on this UNESCO site. It was a failure of diligence of the House not to consider that option.

We now have this Bill, based on decisions that were taken last year. The Leader of the House was right to say that it is all about the governance involved. It creates the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, and we will have the Delivery Authority, which will operate as a company limited by guarantee. This is reminiscent of the London Olympics, but I was here when the London Olympics were first being considered, and I can tell the Leader of the House that the way in which the Olympics Delivery Body was shaped was not exactly a positive experience for us in Scotland, or for Wales and the regions of the United Kingdom.

What I remember about the way in which the London Olympics were designed was that we got next to nothing in the way of contracts. Large sums of our lottery money were diverted to pay for activity down here, and there were years of wrangling over the Barnett consequentials. The Government attempted to define the spending in London to build all that activity as UK-wide spending. If I remember correctly, it was only following the intervention of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer that this was eventually resolved in a Joint Committee. That experience was not good for us, and that is why my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts has to be supported. This has to be a project for the whole of the United Kingdom. We were all shocked by what happened at the Olympics, and this new project has to be seen to be of real benefit for the nations and regions of the UK. I hope that when the Bill goes into Committee, my hon. Friend will be listened to carefully and patiently—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) says he wants to be listened to as well. I think we have an alliance here, and knowing him and my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts, it would be a formidable one that would obviously deliver what we want. I look forward to them getting substantial and solid results. I see that the Leader of the House is perhaps wondering how she will be able to take them on to ensure that we all get the right results.

We have no issue with the northern estate programme. Looking at the plans for Richmond House, it is hard to see how any alternative could be designed. I know it was a hard job to figure out where we would go, and I do not think there is any issue about how this should be done. Richmond House was the right choice. Looking at the figures, I see that the works there have been vaguely costed at about £500 million, and that it will then become some sort of education centre. That has not yet been specified, so we are not too sure about what will happen there.

However, the plan seems to be to create a carbon copy of this place in Richmond House. Have we all seen the photographs of this? I am looking round, and I see that most Members have done so. It will be almost exactly the same as this place. What is the point of that? What is the point of moving all this somewhere else for six years, only for that place to become something else again? Why are we not using this opportunity to do something more imaginative? Why are we not thinking about all the difficulties that we have in this place, including our laborious processes and the ridiculous and silly conventions? Apparently it is even the job of the Speaker to dress the male Members of this House! How about looking at some of the ridiculous, absurd things that waste our time and get in the way of how we approach our business in this House? Why can we not go away for a few years and do things like a 21st-century Parliament? What is wrong with that? What is wrong with the idea of going to the northern estate, doing something different and then coming back here? Members can then come back to this 19th-century palace and get on with their usual business, but it shows such a lack of imagination.

Sir Edward Leigh: I know that the hon. Gentleman is having fun, but there is a kernel of truth in that. One reason why they are having to demolish Richmond House is that the House authorities insisted that they wanted a Chamber of exactly the same size and these very wide division Lobbies, which means that we have to demolish a whole listed building. If we had modern voting during the temporary decant, as they do in every other Parliament in Europe, and just had a card to put next to a machine, we would not need the Division Lobbies, and we would not need to demolish Richmond House.

Pete Wishart: I am warming to the right hon. Gentleman. That makes it two interventions in a row that contained practically nothing to disagree with. Alliances are building up all over the place and—who knows?—we might actually be able to make some progress when it comes to modernising this place and making it look and feel like something belonging to this century, not the 19th century. I am pretty certain that he is already thinking, “I’m going to vote for this guy for Speaker,” because that is the sort of agenda that I will be putting forward. We need proper reform of this place, and it cannot come quick enough. I am looking forward to support from right across the House for that agenda.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I can see that I am wearing your patience a little thin, so I will end by saying that the SNP will not oppose the Second Reading this evening. I hope that some of our modest suggestions and proposals will be at least considered—even just for the temporary decant. There is no reason why we cannot do things a little differently and be a bit more imaginative in how we do our business. We could have a look and see whether our absurd conventions actually have any value and work for us. Let us redesign how we work in this place.

We will be watching just how much the project is going to cost, because I must say again that this is not going to go down well. I do not think that the public
have actually caught on to this yet—they might have done after my speech—and I do not think that they have really realised what this House is doing with this money. If the price tag is going to be £10 billion to £12 billion, I can only foresee difficulties, problems and issues as the process progresses through the House. Best of luck with it all. The SNP will not oppose the Bill tonight. We will try to get something for the nations of the UK and regions of England, and I hope that the House considers that as the Bill goes through Committee.

3.12 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this debate, which relates to an issue that nobody really wants to address. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) about the cost of the programme. Nobody likes the cost, but the truth of the matter is that if a building of this nature was in private ownership, we would be demanding that the private owners did the repairs and brought it up to standard.

This building is important not just for the United Kingdom, but for the world. I welcome the Bill, and I welcome the Leader of the House’s commitment to getting on with the job, as it has been pushed to the side for far too long because it has been too difficult.

I understand the opposition and dislike of my colleagues who would prefer us not to decant. However, anybody who visits the basement to see the conditions down there—electrical pipes running next to gas pipes and air conditioning pipes—would not want to work down there for very long. Anybody who opposes this move should be sent to work down in the basement for six weeks—six hours would probably be quite sufficient.

However the decision is not just about the basement. The fire safety systems are antiquated, and fire officers are required to patrol the Palace 24 hours a day to be on the lookout for fires. Some of the essential mechanical and electrical services are up to 130 years old, such as the heating, drainage, lighting, water, ventilation and communications. Repairs are needed to Victoria Tower to preserve our Parliamentary Archives, which holds millions of records. I hope that a new home will eventually be found for some of those archives, because that could be an important part of the building in the future.

The Palace was built using Anston limestone, which quickly began to decay, and little was done to prevent its decline during the 19th century. The Bill and the associated proposals address something that has been put to one side for years. Asbestos, which was used extensively during the post-war rebuilding period, is present throughout the building and obviously needs to be replaced. The vast majority of the Palace’s 4,000 bronze windows do not close properly, letting water in and heat out. Many of the historic parts of the Palace are at significant risk.

This programme is the right course of action, and setting up a Sponsor Body to liaise with the House and with the authorities in both Houses is the kind of thing that we need. However, turning to schedule 1 to the Bill, I wonder whether my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is wedded to the fact that the people who are already on the Sponsor Body should not be there for the next five years. It has taken a long time to get the Sponsor Body operating. Its members were appointed through a proper system, and I do not favour the idea of reappointments, because a lot of work has already been done.

I fully accept that we must keep a close eye on the cost of this building, but I also look to the example of what happened when Portcullis House was built. There was a lot of criticism about the cost. It did not help that it was built above Westminster station, which added a lot of extra variables, but look at how the building is used today. It is a solid part of Westminster, and it is always in heavy demand when Parliament is sitting—the rooms where Committees meet and the larger meeting rooms—and we can face problems when a group of schoolchildren comes down, for example. The situation has got better, but it is still quite difficult to book a room.

The Leader of the House has been incredibly patient and good at listening and taking on board all the representations. When we had the debate a few months ago about whether to decant, it was interesting that all the previous Leaders of the House voted for the decant. Every single one of them voted for it in a Division that was completely free for Government Members. Given my right hon. Friend’s views on public spending on big projects, which I will perhaps leave to one side at the moment, I can well understand why she was very reticent to say, “Let’s decant. Let’s move out. Let’s do it that way.”

However, one just has to look at the problems, at what is going on around the House at the moment, and at all the work that is going on year in, year out. Lots of that work cannot take place at the moment, because it would make places inaccessible. I reluctantly came around to the decant idea, but I was previously of the view—I partly regret this, but I understand why it has not been done—that we should take planning powers and become our own planning authority. I recognise that thought has been given to that and that we have decided not to go down that particular route, and I accept that. However, the simple fact is that this is an island building. We are employing the Sponsor Body and using the best available advice for how to do not only a proper renewal job but a restoration job. This is a building that we wish to protect not just for our generation, but for generations to come. Now that the scaffolding has been removed from the north face of Big Ben, people can see the difference made to the clock. I hope future Parliaments and future generations will make sure to keep on top of the restoration project once it has been completed.

Members said earlier, “Leave it for a little while, because we have had enough of austerity and we should not do this.” This project will take six years to get under way. Even now, a lot of the work on this project is not about the bricks and mortar part of the job, nor the decant, but about the planning process. It is about making sure that we get the equipment and materials right so that we can look back on the project and say, “Yes, they did make it right. They did get the aesthetics right. They did get the building right.”

The one thing I always point out to my constituents when they come down to Portcullis House is that the stone is from the Ann Twyford quarry in Birchover in my constituency. Portcullis House is a fine building we are proud of. Once the restoration of this building is done, I want to make sure it is in a similar position.
3.20 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) for his speech, and we now move from the dales to the valleys. I think he and I would agree that, as the Leader of the House said, when we first looked at restoration and renewal—I first looked at it in 2008 when I was Deputy Leader of the House—we saw it with a sceptical eye. I represent one of the poorest constituencies in the land, and I would love to see large amounts of money spent on infrastructure projects in my constituency to improve the national health service and to save people from the food bank existence that many in work still have to pursue. The truth is that this is not either/or but both/and. We have to tackle the poverty in our land and we have to make sure that this building is put right.

I know the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) wants to live in this building, however horrible he was about it, and my one major difference with him is that I do not think we can just sell the building as it would no longer be the icon that it currently is. Every Hollywood movie filmed in London, if it wants to show the United Kingdom, shows this building. The building would no longer be that icon if it were just a hotel. Frankly, I do not think anyone would want to take on the building on a commercial basis unless we had already sorted out the plumbing, the electricity and all the mechanical engineering. In actual fact, it would be more expensive for us to find a completely alternative venue, rather than to make this building good.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that, as the building is a UNESCO world heritage site, it is the responsibility of the Government, through the Treasury, to fund the work or to make sure it happens?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely, and the point has been made many times not only by my hon. Friend but by the Public Accounts Committee, which she chairs, that this is a cost-saving measure, rather than something to our detriment.

The Leader of the House mentioned many of the problems in the building, including the falling masonry and the danger of fire, but I want to start with the stench. Maybe this year more than any other, but the stench on the Terrace, on the Principal Corridor and in the basement rooms is absolutely appalling because the building’s drainage system is from 150 years ago. There is a beautiful piece of Victorian engineering down in the basement underneath the Speaker’s garden, but it is not fit for the 21st century. We need to be doing these things better.

For that matter, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said admirably from the Front Bench, we need to get to a place where all the energy we consume in this building is used efficiently and is carbon neutral. That will be possible only if we have a major renewal of the mechanical engineering aspects of the building, which will be 75% of the bill.

I sometimes feel we are like King Canute trying to prevent the sewage from climbing up the stairs towards us. That is fitting because, of course, King Canute was the first person to build a palace on this piece of land at the beginning of the 11th century. It is bizarre that The Times has its office in a portakabin on the roof of this building. We would laugh at any other country in the world that looked after a UNESCO-listed building in such an appalling way.

The cloisters, one of the most beautiful parts of the building, are completely hidden to the vast majority of the public. They were built by Henry VIII, and who knows whether Thomas Cromwell, Oliver Cromwell or whoever else kept their horses in there? It does not matter, because the truth is that this beautiful perpendicular architecture is falling apart on our watch as we simply do not have the capacity to do all the work that needs to be done to the building at the same time.

We have dragged our heels. They may be beautiful heels, but they have been dragged for far too long. I am delighted that the Leader of the House, perhaps seizing the moment after the terrible fire at Notre Dame, which brought home the fact that a building is at most danger of fire during such work—exactly the situation in which we find ourselves—is taking advantage of the moment to put on her wellington boots and stomp over to Downing Street to say that now is the time to bring forward the Bill. I am enormously grateful to her for doing that.

We have already made some decisions, and I know people will want to review and revise those decisions endlessly into the future. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) did a good job of making sure that the Joint Committee on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings Bill did not keep on revising the decisions we have already decided. One of the things we have decided is that we will move out in one fell swoop and that we will come back. That does not necessarily mean that every single aspect of the Chamber will look exactly as it looks now.

We have to make sure this Chamber has proper disabled access. That will be complicated but, as the Joint Committee heard, there are many churches across the land that have had to deal with precisely these issues and have done so very beautifully and elegantly in a way that meets all the statutory requirements while respecting the history, the tradition and the architectural beauty of the places concerned. I am sure we can do that in this Chamber so that, for instance, a Clerk would be able to sit at the Table in a wheelchair, if necessary. Or, for that matter, an hon. Member in a wheelchair would not have to sit at the Bar of the House but could sit somewhere else—they could even be a Minister, a shadow Minister or the Speaker. All these things should be obvious to us today.

Other Members have already mentioned the issues for partially sighted people. Some years ago when I sat on the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) might mention later, one of the things that came home to me most strongly is that the dim lighting in this building makes it particularly difficult for people with partial sight to feel confident as they go around the building, to read papers and to take part in discussions and debates. That obviously affects Members of both Houses.

We have also decided that we will decant to Richmond House—that is a decision. There is no point constantly revising it. That is what is going to happen. I say to
those who want constantly to revise these issues that, by doing so, all we would be doing is delaying, delaying and delaying, and every year of delay is another £100 million added to the bill.

We have also decided in principle to set up arm’s length bodies, just as the Olympics were delivered, with the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority, which is precisely what this Bill introduces. I fully support that process. There are, however, some problems that will need to be addressed in Committee and during the Bill’s remaining stages. The first is the issue of planning. The biggest risk to this whole process is the planning process. If we end up in protracted planning rows with Westminster City Council or if there is a judicial review, which could take many years, about either the northern estate programme or the restoration and renewal programme, that could put paid to the whole project. Everyone might at that point throw up their hands and say, “Oh gosh—this is too impossible. We will have to go back to ‘patch and mend’.”

I really want us to make sure that we have made the right decision on the planning question. The Committee considered the matter, but I think it was given wrong advice—bad advice, if I am honest. Notwithstanding the earlier comments of the Leader of the House about the difference between this and the London Olympics Bill—five local, planning authorities in east London were involved in that Bill, but only one is involved in this one—the repeated advice seemed to be that if we included a planning clause in this Bill, it would become a hybrid Bill.

I do not think there is any reason why this should become a hybrid Bill solely because of that. If we wanted to state that this was not to be such a Bill, that would be entirely within our power. It would be perfectly possible for us to say that we would give planning to the Delivery Authority, which could do exactly what was done during the Olympics: chair a planning committee, present planning proposals to itself and consider them openly. It managed to carry everybody with it, and the process was not confrontational; it simply meant that things could be done in a time-efficient way.

Members may not be aware of this, but one of the issues that has plagued us now for more than a decade—16 years, I think—is what lighting we can put in Westminster Hall. We have put forward endless proposals; I have seen at least a dozen sets of pictures of what the lighting could be, yet we have still not managed to replace the hideous things up there now. I fear that we are going to go through exactly the same process—round and round in circles, not voting in Division Lobbies but trying to persuade another authority that we are doing the right thing.

I also want to raise accountability to Parliament. At the moment, there are more peers than MPs among the membership of the Sponsor Body. As the Leader of the House said, there are seven members, and the Whips Office decided that the individual parties should nominate—not elect—people for it. Those on the Sponsor Body will be the major conduit for accountability to the House of Commons. They will make sure that the project does not run completely out of kilter with what Members of this House or the House of Lords think acceptable. I think it would be better if there were more Members of the House of Commons than of the House of Lords on the Sponsor Body because we have the primary responsibility for finance and have done since the 17th or maybe 16th century—and, after all, we are the representatives of our constituents.

Secondly, it would be better if Sponsor Body members were elected rather than appointed. Our experience thus far of electing Select Committee Chairs has been entirely positive: they have a mandate of their own and manage to bind views across the whole House. In general, transparency is a good thing. I note that the Leader of the House, when giving evidence to the Liaison Committee about something completely different last week, said that she is always in favour of elections whenever possible. I very much hope that we will be able to make that change during the passage of the Bill.

The Committee considered questions to the House, which could be made easier. Members will have genuine questions—why wouldn’t they, given that this will be one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the country? There will have to be somebody who answers for the Sponsor Body. That cannot be an external person; it needs to be a Member of Parliament. My suggestion is that the vice-chair of the Sponsor Body should be a Member of the House of Commons and respond to questions in the House. We should set aside a time every six weeks or so for 10 or 15 minutes of questions.

As Members will know, the next step is the northern estate programme. As chair of the finance committee, I would prefer that programme to move on a couple more steps before it is handed to the Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body. We are close to presenting a planning application to Westminster City Council and we need to get a little further down the road before we hand it over; otherwise, there is a danger that the Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body will get obsessed with the northern estate programme rather than with developing a full budget and costed plans for restoration and renewal.

We should be ambitious in this project. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire expressed valid concerns, and although I disagree with some of them, there is no point in our coming back to a building that looks exactly the same as now in every single regard. It has to have much better access for the public. My constituents have a long way to come if they want to see Parliament. At the moment, they find it difficult to do a proper tour of Parliament unless they can get here by 10 o’clock on a Monday morning. That is really difficult to achieve, especially for a primary school.

I would like us to have a system whereby the Gallery is much more convenient for members of the public to use. Perhaps they might even be able to talk in the Gallery, so that what is going on in the Chamber can be explained to youngsters, rather than their having to go out of the Gallery to have it explained. I see no reason why members of the public should not be able to tweet when they are in the Public Gallery, as visitors can when they go round the Bundestag or most other Parliaments. I would like us to have much easier and subsequent access for disabled people, not only to the Gallery, which is obvious, but because the rest of the building needs to feel far more like it belongs to the whole of the public in this country.

My final point is that we will not be able to deliver this project unless we train thousands more British people to be able to do the work. It is not just about the
crafts, such as being able to cut stone and make new gargoyles. No doubt there will be a new gargoyle of the Leader of the House, or the next Leader of the House, or, if the Leader of the House becomes Prime Minister, perhaps several gargoyles— Interruption. Or one of the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), indeed; that would be an even nicer gargoyle.

It is not just the craft skills that will be needed; we will need skills at the high-tech end of energy conservation, information technology, cabling and central heating in a system such as this, as well as conservation. I really hope that we will set up academies in every part of this country—we should be doing so now—so that young people from every single constituency in the land will think about working in this building as a matter of pride. I hope that at least 100 or 150 youngsters from the Rhondda end up working here, so that it is genuinely a palace for the people again.

3.37 pm

Sir Paul Bercow (Mole Valley) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her introduction—it was a clear and useful indication of why we are here to debate this matter—and I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who has obviously gone through the Bill carefully.

I listened to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) with interest, and I mostly understood him; as he knows, there is a language difficulty, but I did understand him— Interruption. If he addresses me, he has to do so very slowly. I do not agree with him, partly because this building is an iconic symbol of democracy. I say that as an ethnic minority immigrant from the Commonwealth, where some of the parliamentary buildings, particularly in Australia, are very much the same and run on the same lines, although the language in the Australian House in particular gets a little heavier than it does here, or than would be allowed here. I bring a lot of guests to Parliament—I run functions and so forth in the House—and to them, when they stand in the Chamber, this place is the epitome of democracy. The people most affected by it are the Americans. Over the years I have brought hundreds of them to the Chamber, and they envy us for what we have. We have to keep it.

I thought the need for works was well established—the Leader of the House set out various points as to why—but then I read some articles in the Sunday papers and it was quite clear that it had not been understood. I have brought members of the national press down and traipsed them through the underground. They understand, but not everybody does, and they also understand why it is going to cost so much money: it is an enormous task. The basic structure of the building is sound. Yes, bits fall off inside and outside, but that is superficial. Really, it is about the infrastructure underneath. I discovered that the House has been looking into doing something about the structure down there since 1904; it has taken us a while to get here.

We need to discuss the size of the task, which will mean for all the Members of the press, a little repetition. Most Members are aware that the House has a basement, which has a long passageway that runs the whole length of the building. The 86 vertical chimneys running from that passageway were originally designed for ventilation. This of course means—this had not been thought through—that a fire starting in that passageway could whip up any or all of those 86 chimneys and create a real disaster. If that happens, and if no life is lost, I wonder whether the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire would feel all right about the fact that this iconic building had gone because we had not done the works.

At present, the chimneys carry a mass of electrical services of varying age, many of which are defective. We have gas pipes, air-conditioning conduits, steam pipes, telephone systems, communication fibres, and, as has already been mentioned, a ghastly old—1888—overloaded sewerage system. This infrastructure serves the whole building from end to end, moving up through the chimneys, and there is a duplication right across the roof as well. In the days when people did not know about asbestos, that material was literally and liberally splashed everywhere by brushes from buckets. As I have mentioned, the sewerage system consists of two large steel tanks that collect from a very large pipe that runs the whole length of the building. The system was put in, as I have said, in 1888 and suffers from repeated bursts.

A full decant was agreed by the House in the January 2018 resolution. Then there were the current security requirements. Those of us who arrived here 10 years ago did not need those security requirements then, but we do now. The whole security atmosphere has changed, so anything that we do and anywhere that we decant to needs to be within the current but enhanced security envelope. As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said, we need to decant to the northern estate. The work that should have been done there does not go back to 1904, but it does go back decades, which is why we have the difficulty and the cost. The cost of refurbishing that building to modern standards will be enormous.

The complexity of the task is quite staggering. It is for that reason that I am 100% behind setting up the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority. Although the ultimate task is the restoration and renewal of the parliamentary buildings, it makes sense that the major works enabling the decant to the northern estate and Richmond House should be undertaken by that body, I note the point that the hon. Member for Rhondda made. It is possible, if not probable, that, by the time those two authorities are set up and under way, the planning would have been—I hope—secured for the northern estate and perhaps even for Richmond House. I wonder—I say this slightly with tongue in cheek—whether Richmond House will be delisted and a new building of quality put in. The building must be of quality. We cannot have a Perth tent stuck in the middle of that space. It will be interesting to see how long it takes Heritage England to list the new building. My only nervousness relates to what has been said by others: we must move quickly for the safety of the building and for the people in this building—but quickly will mean many years.

3.43 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I come to this debate, as others have already said, having sat on various Committees, bodies and boards regarding the restoration and renewal project. I was on the first Joint Committee, which assessed the independent options appraisal and reported in September 2016. I have been a member of
the Finance Committee, currently chaired by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which has looked at this project and at the northern estate programme since I was elected in 2015. I am currently a member of the shadow Sponsor Board for the R and R project, and I served on the Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), which scrutinised this Bill. Although I have been sceptical of this project, I have approached the work of all the bodies I have served on constructively. I will come to my concerns later, but I will first address the areas of consensus that I think are important.

There is no doubt that this Palace is in need of significant work. It has been neglected for decades by the British political class who call it their home, and it is now this generation of politicians who need to take the difficult decisions about the building’s future. Members will not be surprised if I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), do not hold much sentimentality for the building itself as the home of Parliament because I can see how modern Parliament buildings allow politics to flourish elsewhere. However, I do acknowledge that this is an important listed building and a world heritage site, so action is required.

If we are to insist on Parliament remaining in this building, we have to acknowledge that crowbarring a 21st-century Parliament into a 19th-century building will require compromises and premiums. It will cost more for us to get a less functional building than if we were to look at a new building. That said, we are where we are—that is, discussing a Bill to progress the project. I agree that, should the project go ahead, it can only realistically be achieved if Parliament is fully decanted, as the risk to personal safety, project delays and cost overruns all significantly increase with any form of partial decant. I concur again with my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire that we have a responsibility to the safety of staff. I also agree that the delivery model of the Sponsor Board and the Delivery Authority is the right one. As has been said, the London Olympics derived much of their success from their organisational model and this project seems to mirror that model. However, other factors in the success of the London Olympics were the support of the Government and the support of the public, and there is some work to do on both fronts with regards to this project.

Ever since the first Joint Committee was ready to publish its report, the Government have been lukewarm in their support. It is hardly surprising that while another controversial issue has been at play, the Government would want to kick this one as far away from them as possible, although I acknowledge that this Leader of the House has driven the matter of late. A line of discussion in the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee was how to bind the Government in—to make them owners and cheerleaders for this project. One way to do so would be to have a Treasury Minister appointed to the Sponsor Board. The Chancellor of the day will be signing the massive cheques for this project, so it would seem sensible to have them as part of the operational decision-making process, but this has not yet been acceded. However, I do believe that the Government need to get on with the job shown by the Leader of House, that is a point of concern for me.

There has always been a concern about the reaction of the public to billions of pounds being spent on the workplace of politicians, and I believe that our constituents’ scepticism will be most keenly felt the further they are from London. As it stands right now, this project will be another massive London-centric capital project. London and the south-east already benefit from a third of UK capital spending, coupled with all the job creation and economic benefits that come from it. I am a massive sports fan and a former athlete so I was a supporter of the London Olympics, but there is no doubt that we have lessons to learn from that process. The most important lesson is the way in which good causes funding was sucked away from the nations and regions to pay for the Olympics. In Scotland, that amounted to £75 million. We heard just last week—seven years on—that £30 million of that money is to return over several years. In that sense, there is no doubt that it was the London Olympics and not the UK’s Olympics.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We are looking at getting jobs and business from around the country into the project. I hope that the Sponsor Body insists on a proper evaluation to check that that aim is actually being delivered on, and that we do not get charlatan contractors promising the earth and then not delivering for constituents across the country.

Neil Gray: Yes, and that is a line from the report that the hon. Lady and I both helped to author, alongside the right hon. Member for Meriden. The devil will be in the detail as this project progresses. It will be important not only that the Government accept that fact—and that is clear through the Bill’s progress—but that the Sponsor Body is attuned to it, so that we do not see the same mistakes again. If this project has any chance of gaining political and public support, it must be a genuinely UK-wide project, and that means that we should see discernible benefits across the UK. That was a topic that I and others on the scrutiny Committee were keen to explore. I have a possible solution that I have already discussed and that I hope the Government will take seriously.

Dr Wollaston: I apologise for being absent for part of this debate because I have been chairing a Select Committee. It is on that point that I would like to ask the hon. Gentleman’s advice. Does he agree that the public would be deeply shocked if we were seen to be building obsolescence into such an extraordinarily expensive project by not having the capacity for electronic voting posts in Select Committee Rooms on the northern estate redevelopment, so that at least, if this place got its act together with modern practices, we would not be interrupting repeatedly, and at length, Select Committee hearings by the way that we vote in this place?

Neil Gray: That is a very good point. It is clear from the hon. Lady’s intervention, among others, that the majority view—in this debate, certainly, and in others—has been that we cannot return to a Parliament that is identical to the one that we leave. There have to be changes made; there has to be progress. I hope that that will be borne out in the passage of this Bill and the discussions that follow.

My suggestion for how to make this more of a UK-wide project was contained in the pre-legislative scrutiny report. It was not apparent that the Leader of
the House acknowledged it in her direct response, but I thank her for acknowledging it earlier and saying that she will consider it. Alongside a commitment from the Government to ensure that contractors and skills are procured from across the UK, as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) mentioned, there must be a greater discernible benefit for the nations and regions. I have already explained how London sucks in the majority of the limited capital spending that there is by Government. This project, when it begins, will clearly put incredible pressure on capital spending elsewhere in the UK, and so will compound London’s dominance in those terms.

My answer would be for a nations and regions capital fund to be established as part of the project. This would see money going to all corners of these isles to allow relevant authorities to progress capital projects, boosting economic growth and job creation locally and countering any negative impact from such a massive project going on in London. One way of doing that would be deciding on a percentage of the overall cost of the project and then allocating it to each nation and region on a proportionate basis.

I am approaching this issue constructively and offering ideas in good faith. I just hope that the Government will respond on the same basis.

3.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who has proved to be outstanding in this job. Clearly, she has a wonderful commitment to this place and its future.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); it was a pleasure to serve under her chairmanship on the Committee that considered this Bill. I have to say that as the Committee wound its way through many hearings, I got more worried, not less. As my right hon. Friend has mentioned, we were told that the full decant may now slip beyond 2025—a figure of 2028 was given. There is a real danger of us fiddling while Rome burns. We are told repeatedly, and I am sure it is true, that this building is an imminent fire risk. Mention has been made many times of the fate of Notre Dame. There is no doubt at all that we would see those doors being put in place. The fundamental issue must be safety.

I agree that Members of this House must take control of the Sponsor Body. I do not want to see a committee composed of the great and the good—so-called experts—starting a project that will end up being a feeding frenzy for architects, surveyors and builders and will cost many billions of pounds. Although the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) swept aside my intervention, I think that the points made by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) are apposite. There is no appetite among the general public for Members of Parliament to spend billions of pounds on their own building. When the public look at their schools and hospitals—

Meg Hillier: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: I see that I have immediately prompted something. I give way to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Meg Hillier: We all know that painful balance, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, it is not either/or. We need to do both. Does he agree that we all have a responsibility to champion this and to remember that we in this Chamber represent only 650 people who work in this place at any one time? There are 1 million visitors a year and thousands of staff, and we are doing this for them, as well as for the public.

Sir Edward Leigh: I do not deny for a moment that the work has to be done. It has to be done properly, but we are in danger of creating a gold-standard operation in building a permanent replica Chamber. That is not just a worry for people like me, who perhaps share my political prejudices about public spending and spending other people’s money in the way we would spend our own. Many others share that worry. Simon Jenkins recently wrote an article in The Guardian in which he excoriated the cost of building a permanent emergency Chamber.

I do not deny that the work has to be done. I accept the vote of the House of Commons. I campaigned against it. It was quite a narrow vote. The debate has not reflected the fact that many Members of Parliament share my views on this, but we have decided to decant if necessary. I have accepted the will of the House. There will come a time when it may be necessary to decant. The point I want to make is that if there is a serious and imminent danger, we have to get on with the work now, and work may have to be done around us if necessary. It is said that this is impossible. I do not know, but so often in the private sector—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise profusely to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I hope he will understand.
Yesterday at Defence questions, Mr Speaker made it very plain that, because of all the speculation in the media about changes to the legal protection of veterans, he expected the Ministry of Defence to make an oral statement in the House today. It elected not to do so and instead put a written statement on the Order Paper this morning. I have just treble-checked in the Library, and that statement has still not been made available at almost 4 o’clock. In all the years I have been in this House, I have never known a written statement not to turn up by 4 pm.

This is symptomatic of a three-way war between No. 10, the Northern Ireland Office and the MOD about who is in charge of veterans policy. Could you try to overcome this chaos in Whitehall and use your best offices to find out when today—if, indeed, at all—we will be given the written statement on this critical issue that we have been promised all day?

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House and to you, but because I had come hot-foot from the Library, when I first rose I had not noticed that the Leader of the House was in her place. I do not know whether she could rise briefly to explain to the House the inexcusable delay of this critical WMS that affects veterans across the United Kingdom. Can she perhaps assist us?

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I can say that I am very sympathetic to my right hon. Friend, and I am afraid I do not have an answer, but I will pursue this straightaway.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The message is out there. Let us look forward to an early written ministerial statement.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a fair point about the cloisters. I am just making my own point that the most important risk is that of fire, and I would have thought that we should drop everything else and try to deal with that.

I said earlier that I have accepted the will of the House, and it may well be necessary to have a decant, but I think it would be possible, certainly if we got rid of the September sittings—this point has not been mentioned yet—to make quicker progress. Undoubtedly, some of the problems we have been experiencing in recent years have revolved around the September sittings. I certainly believe that the Leader of the House could take professional advice on this, and if we could break up for the summer recess on 20 July, or thereabouts, and work full pelt until early October, perhaps we could make better progress.

The issue now is no longer about decant or no decant; the issue is whether, in the current economic climate, we can justify knocking down a grade II listed building, which was only completed in 1987, to accommodate a permanent replica Chamber of exactly the same size as the Chamber we are in, with Division Lobbies of the same size. To facilitate that, we will have to knock down a perfectly good listed building, which can be renovated and restored. By the way, this building, designed by Sir William Whitfield, has won numerous awards. The announcement that we were going to knock it down came just as he was approaching his death, and near his 100th birthday, and it is a strange way to celebrate the best of British.

When people, such as the hon. Member for Meriden (Chris Bryant), say that we could circumvent this process by giving ourselves planning powers, I just do not think that washes. I do not think it washes politically, and I do not think it is the right thing to do. Yes, we have to go through the normal planning procedure. This is a listed building. There will be long delays. The House must know that, already, campaigning organisations like SAVE are gearing up, preparing for a full public inquiry. Indeed, I have no doubt that there will be a full public inquiry; and there should be a full public inquiry. That could entail years of delay. Also—it is almost relevant to the point of order—there have already been disputes between the House authorities and the Ministry of Defence about the use of the car park. All these things are adding delay on to delay.

I should have thought that in the current economic climate, it would be possible to get on with the work as quickly as possible, and when it became necessary to move, to move to a cheaper option. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden mentioned Church House, but there may be security concerns. When the original Committee met, they were simply going to build a replica House of Commons in the courtyard of Richmond House, which would not have entailed demolition. Then they found that the measurements were wrong; but the courtyard is still there. We do not
necessarily need a replica the same size as this Chamber. We do not necessarily need to vote during a short period in the way that we do now. As I mentioned, we could use existing terminals in the Lords. The House will find sorts of ways of doing this job more expeditiously and more cheaply, and equally safely. That is what I would suggest.

I have had meetings with Sir Michael Hopkins, the architect of Portcullis House. He designed the building during the problems with the IRA. It is absolutely bombproof. It is not ideal, but an emergency Chamber could be placed in the atrium of Portcullis House—an infinitely cheaper option. I agree it is not ideal, but actually we do not want to be too comfortable.

The problem I fear is that we may become too comfortable. If we are in a replica Chamber that looks almost exactly like this one—although it seems to have a more IKEA, Swedish feel to it, in a nod to modernism—I think we will become too comfortable. Many Members fear that, as the architects, builders and surveyors get hold of this project, and as more and more asbestos is discovered, and more and more problems, we could be out, not just for five years but for eight or 10. That is a real fear.

I personally believe the Leader of the House; I know that she is absolutely committed to our coming back. Other Members are worried that there will be more and more debate about whether, when we come back, we should change the whole nature of this place—our procedures and all the decor and so on. The Leader of the House has to convince us that every bit of the Barry structure—this iconic building—every bit of the Pugin decoration, which is admired worldwide, will be replaced exactly as it is, so that after five or eight or 10 years, we come back to Committee Rooms, to a Chamber, to Lobbies, that look identical. Of course the electrics, air conditioning and sewerage will be safer and better, but she has to convince Members of Parliament that the building will be exactly the same; because this is an historic building. It sums up what our nation is all about.

Not many Members—I think only three of us, including the shadow Leader of the House—attended an exercise last week in which, within an hour, the House authorities organised the House of Commons moving, in an emergency, to the Chamber of the House of Lords. They can do that within an hour. We went there. The tables were changed around. We sat on the red Benches—probably the only chance I will ever get to sit on the red Benches. It was a very enjoyable experience, I have to say. Lovely decor. Very civilised atmosphere. Much less confrontational than this place. But it can be done. And I commissioned an architect, who worked pro bono, who proved that it would be possible for the House of Commons, in an emergency, to move there and to take services externally if we were dealing with them there. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden has also mentioned Church House.

It is not widely known that there is a flat-pack Chamber of the House of Commons, which could be set up in, for instance, Methodist Central Hall in an hour if there is an emergency. We really do have to be cognisant of public opinion. Of course we have to spend the money that is necessary; of course we have to make this place safe, but we cannot treat ourselves differently from the way that we would expect, for instance, local authorities to treat themselves in a similar situation.

When my own local authority, West Lindsey, had to move from its old guildhall to the modern guildhall, it used innovative ways of working with the private sector. When it created the chamber, it did not seek to create the old fashioned chamber, surrounded by wood and all the rest of it, which could only be used once a month. It created a room that could be used for other purposes.

The problem with creating the replica Chamber is that once we leave it what will it be used for? It is said that it will be an education centre. We have a good education centre with a mock-up of the House of Commons. I know it is only a temporary structure, but it could be made permanent. Do we really need an entire replica Chamber for 20 or 30 primary school kids? The Leader of the House said we can use it for other purposes. Every other business in the country which has to move a part of its business to another part of its premises makes sure that it can be used for other purposes. We must do the same, otherwise we will be criticised by the public, because it is their money. In creating a space, it has to be capable of being used for other things.

Patrick Grady: I was one of those who took part in the contingency exercise—I think I have even less chance of ending up in the House of Lords than the right hon. Gentleman. The temporary Chamber could be used for all kinds of things. We regularly have vastly oversubscribed Westminster Hall debates, usually on important matters raised via petition by the public about how terrible the Government’s policies are, where it is standing room only and Members are not able to speak. The Scottish Parliament Chamber is used much more flexibly, for example for the Festival of Politics and Youth Parliament debates. There will be plenty of use for a temporary space that will hopefully be much more modern and accessible than this one, which he seems to just want to restore to exactly the way it is now.

Sir Edward Leigh: When we create the temporary space it has to be able to be a modern structure that can be used for many purposes—exhibition space, Chamber, Youth Parliament and education centre—but I am not convinced that creating a permanent replica of the House of Commons that is exactly this size, with the Press Gallery and five rows of green Benches, is absolutely necessary. Anyway, I have made my point.

There is one point I would like to raise before I sit down. I was approached by the chairman of the Press Gallery. When we move to Richmond House, the number of offices for the Press Gallery will be dramatically reduced from 150 or thereabouts to 60. We should be aware of that problem. I hope the Leader of the House is also aware of it and takes action on it.

We have a fundamentally sound structure in terms of materials: it is old, but it is fundamentally sound. We have a problem in terms of the mechanics, the electrics and the sewerage. That is solvable. We can undertake an operation that is safe and timely, but our fundamental concern, after safety, must be our taxpayers’ resources. I will end on this point: let us not treat ourselves differently from how we would treat local government. Let us do this job well, but let us do it in a cost-effective way.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I hope what I am about to say will be helpful to the Leader of the House. As I said in an intervention
earlier, my history is that I served as a member of the Holyrood Progress Group up until 2004 with two other elected Members of the Scottish Parliament. I therefore know a bit about what it was like to be in a temporary structure, at the top of the Mound, before moving into the new building we created in 2004. The temporary building we were in at the top of the Mound in Edinburgh was the original IKEA Parliament, if ever I saw one. I want to make three points today.

First, when I was a child in my home town of Tain in the Highlands—we all know about the pride of small towns—it was said among the good Tainites that the stone that comes from the quarry behind the town was the second choice for the Palace of Westminster. Sadly, I fear that that turned out to be something of a myth, but it was a lovely myth to believe in at the time. When we came to build the Scottish Parliament, we deliberately went out into the regions of Scotland to use materials. What is used outside and within the building, and in Queensberry House, is Caithness flagstone, a beautiful material. That was a considerable boost to the industry and the economy of that part of Caithness. The building is clad with granite from Kemnay in Aberdeenshire. My point and my plea to the Leader of the House is this: as and when works proceed here, could we make the most strenuous effort not necessarily to use Caithness flagstone—although I very much hope that we would—but to source materials from different parts of the UK? That would be one way of selling the project, if you like, to the people.

Secondly, when I rose to my feet in the temporary Chamber at the top of the Mound, one thing that was very apparent to me—my wife is disabled, and I take on board the very good points made by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman)—was that the access to the temporary building was frankly appalling. Because I was married to a disabled person, that fired up my passion for making the new building absolutely disabled-friendly. When times got tough, which they most certainly did, that was my guiding light. I was damned if I was going to give way on that. We were going to complete this building and it was going to be the best thing for my wife and all the other disabled people. As I said in my intervention, the flak that we got was unbelievable. I say as a friend to the Leader of the House and to everyone who will be involved in this project in future that there will be flak and there will be trouble. There always is with a project of this nature, but be of good heart.

The flak got particularly bad when I had to announce the winning design for the reception desk in Holyrood. I was chairman of the arts committee—[Interruption.] I see the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) nodding; he will recall this. I chaired a small committee and we had the television cameras and the newspapers there. I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am very proud to say that this is the winning design.” A certain newspaper—I almost called it a rag—called the Daily Record, published that Thursday morning, and said, “What a splendid job you did. Well done.” But we pulled through and today, as I said, the building is seen to be an icon of high-quality modern architecture in Scotland. When I say to people, “What about the desk?” they say “What desk? What are you talking about?”

Pete Wishart: I recall, of course, the hon. Gentleman’s little difficulties with that desk. I am interested in his views on the expectations versus the reality, which was one of the issues with the Scottish Parliament. If my recollection is correct, the cost of the Scottish Parliament was estimated to be £50 million and it came in at something like 10 times that cost. Is it not best just to be honest and up front with people as we go down such routes? We should not suggest that this can be done on the cheap and that it will only cost a few billion pounds when it is not going to be that at all. Be up front and honest and I am sure, if the Government do that, that they can learn from the experience that we all had to go through bitterly in the Scottish Parliament.

Jamie Stone: That is very sage advice. To get the record as straight as I can within what we know, much as I was very friendly with and admired hugely the late Donald Dewar, at some point as the Bill that established the Scottish Parliament passed through this place, I think he said on the record that it would cost some £40 million, and therein lay the trouble, because we were never going to build very much for £40 million.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, except that £40 million was for a rebuilt Parliament—a reconstructed building—which was to be opposite St Andrew’s House. The £400 million that the new-build Parliament ended up costing could not be compared as a result, and that is where the hilarity in the press came from.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Nevertheless, that is the way things work in the press. That millstone was around our necks for the rest of time. I say to the Leader of the House, “Be of good heart”, because these things do go away. We now see people coming into the Scottish Parliament, saying, “What a splendid job you did. Well done.” My third point has already been hinted at by other speakers. When we came to do the fine woodwork in the dining room, the Committee rooms and so on, the sad fact was that we did not have those carpentry skills in Scotland or anywhere in the UK. We had to go to eastern European countries to find them. Sadly, I suspect that that is the same today as we embark on this project. The point was made about establishing apprenticeships. That is absolutely correct: we should take on young people—although they do not necessarily have to be young—who are willing to learn these new trades. If we have to import the skills from other countries, let us do so, but let us build a bank of people who have these skills. I am thinking of the woodwork and, as has been mentioned, the masonry. I doubt whether we have many masons who can do the standard of work that we see in this building. That then is something for the future, and it could be banked as we embark on other projects the length and breadth of the UK to restore what is one of our greatest heritages—the built heritage—right from my constituency down to Cornwall and the south of England.
It is quite correct, as others have said, that we should be open about the price. This issue bedevilled the project. The public will say, “It’s an awful lot of money”, but if they think we are being honest, they will forgive us. If they think we are being a bit clever with the facts, they will not, believe me. Every few months, the three of us on the committee held a public question and answer session with Members of the Scottish Parliament—and, far more dangerously, with members of the Scottish press—and it worked. People came along and threw us some hellishly difficult questions, and we had to answer them as best we could—if we could not, we took them away and tried to come back. That willingness to be open was part of getting it through. I do not doubt that all involved in what is done in this place in the years to come will be equally open, but it is well worth remembering that.

I will sum up with some appeals. Let us see if we can source local materials. I think about the flagstone of Caithness. When we came to get the oak—one of the main features of Holyrood—we went to the Earl of Cromartie in the county of Ross and Cromarty and bought some splendid oak trees from him. It was very good of him, though he got a good price. When I was in the deepest trouble of all, with this wretched reception desk, when I thought my political career was over—at the ensuing election my majority was slashed, though luckily it rose again in the election after that—the present Duke of Buccleuch stepped forward and, out of the goodness of his heart, gave us free, gratis, the oak to build the reception desk. I have waited very nearly 20 years to put on the record in this place how extremely grateful I am to his grace for his generosity.

In conclusion, I say well done to the Leader of the House. The nettles have been grasped. It was not an easy one to grasp, but future generations will bless the people involved for having had the courage to do what is being done.

4.22 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and to hear his wisdom. He is right that if we do not start by being open and honest about the challenges, we will be on a hiding to nothing. In that respect, the project has been bedevilled with problems, which I will touch on, but I hope that today, when it seems there is broad consensus for the Second Reading, we will be able to move forward.

I welcome the Bill and the personal determination of the Leader of the House to get it through. Her predecessors, for understandable reasons and the reality of politics, were a bit nervous about taking this forward, and there were challenges in getting the vote through in January 2018, but we are here today, with huge progress having been made, and I congratulate her on getting us to this point.

As the Leader of the House knows, this is just the beginning. I want to touch on the history—though that has been well covered by others; on the very real risks; and on the future plans, including the costs. I have the privilege of chairing the Public Accounts Committee. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was one of my predecessors, and although we do not agree on every aspect of this issue, we absolutely agree that we need to watch taxpayers’ money very closely.

As he rightly says, it is not other people’s money; it is the money our constituents work hard for and expect to be spent wisely.

As others have said, we have put this off for far too long. The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) talked about 1904; others talked about what happened 40 years ago. We have pushed this problem away for far too long. It is heartening that it was only seven years ago that the former Clerk of the House commissioned a survey to look at the matter. He feels that that is a long time, but in the grand scheme of things he should be congratulated because it has moved things on much faster than at any time in the previous many decades.

I had the privilege of looking at this on the Public Accounts Committee—I will touch on that and the finances a little later—and while serving on the Joint Committee under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), I thank her again for her stewardship of that Committee. We saw the shadow Sponsor Body at that time.

Others have talked about the risks. It is worth remembering that there have been 66 fires since 2008, as you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker. At any one time there are eight fire wardens patrolling this building. As the Leader of the House said on the radio this morning, only at the end of last year there was one that could have been catastrophic, not for the whole building, but for a certain section of it. It was lucky that it happened during the week, because the patrol pattern must be a bit different at weekends. If it had happened at the weekend, it might not have been discovered so quickly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), in eloquent fashion, highlighted the “big stink”. The big stink of previous times led MPs to decide that it was time to build a sewerage system for London, but we are now suffering our own big stink in parts of the building. It is not nice, it is not healthy, and it is really pretty terrible for the staff working in, particularly, the basement rooms who have to put up with it. We must keep remembering that it is the staff who matter.

Mice are rife in the building. Unlike the Leader of the House, I have not yet seen a mouse in my office, but men repeatedly crawl into the cavity above my office, which is close to the roof, and often, especially when I am here during a recess, I see men crawling into holes in different parts of the building such as the upper corridors. They are doing excellent work, and I applaud them for that, but I know that it is more expensive for them to do it at times when we are not here than it would be if we could decant. That is another reason why the Bill is so important. Of course, asbestos is also a huge problem, and one whose full extent we do not know at this point.

Future plans are critical, and even given the consensus here, different opinions have been expressed about what should happen next. It was heartening to speak to representatives of the Sponsor Body in the Committee, and I have had an opportunity to meet its chair, Liz Peace, on other occasions. She has made clear that its role must be to make it easier for us to make the decisions about how we work, but not to tell us how to do it. That would include ensuring that the building has a connectivity that will be future-proof. For example, we could, if we chose, have video booths instead of the
We also have an opportunity to use the "dead space" between buildings better. I think of the restoration of Hackney town hall, a beautiful 1930s building. Glazing over courtyards has provided a usable space while preserving the beauty and integrity of the building. When people talk about IKEA, we think of the light wood for which it is famous. When old buildings are restored—when workmen go back to the wood and re-polish it—it often turns out not to be dingy and dark, but a great deal brighter and lighter. However, it is a long time since that was done in this place.

Safety is, of course, critical. I sometimes joke, rather cruelly, that at least I am based near a stone staircase, but the reality of that cruel joke is that many staff are in little cubby-holes a long way from a proper fire exit route, and it is not acceptable that we have left it so long for them to be supported. We need to allow for smarter technology to be built in so we future-proof this building, and we need to think, as we allow the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority to get on with it, about our vision for what we would like to see in this place: not tinkering with it every step of the way, not changing the business case and the plans once they are set in stone, but allowing that flexibility to be built in. We must also make it clear at the beginning if there are areas where we do or do not want to see big change.

There are huge opportunities to secure better access for visitors, and to make some money out of this building when we are not sitting. I work in the old Palace now thanks to the privilege of the office I hold; it provides me with a beautiful office. I get to see the House differently from when I was working in other parts of the building, and it is like the Mary Celeste in recess or on a Friday when Members are not around. There is an opportunity if we think flexibly to make sure this place is used more effectively by the very public we are here to serve.

The Bill Committee focused a great deal on the governance aspects. The Sponsor Body is critical because we effectively hold it to account for the money that will be granted for this project. Its chief executive, who is not yet appointed, will be the accounting officer. It is important to get that on the record now, because we might not all be here in future and I hope that future Members will hold that accounting officer personally to account for how the money is spent in this place—and not just here on the Floor of the House when we are discussing estimates but in other forums as well.

The Sponsor Body will set up the Delivery Authority. The people on the Sponsor Body, which has been set up in shadow form, are key figures at the moment. They were appointed for a three-year term and they are less than one year into their term. I echo the comments made by the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) about the need for continuity. I am absolutely in favour of open recruitment, but given that these people went through a full and open recruitment process for the very same job—albeit that it is in shadow form rather than in statute and were appointed less than a year ago—there is scope to roll their term over to at least the end of their three-year term and then have the recruitment process continue as normal. I hope the Leader of the House will consider that so we can get started now on this project.

As the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said, we discussed in Committee the Government having a Treasury Minister on the Sponsor Body to get Government buy-in. I know there can be issues either way, but we must consider that in Committee to see what skin the Government of the day need to have in the game. Of course, the risk is that the Government of the day could decide to pull the plug; one Treasury minister would not be able to stop it, but we must be able to keep a beady eye on taxpayers’ money, alongside other Members of the House on the Committee.
We talked too about the election of Members to the board, which I naturally support, with one caveat.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some very thoughtful remarks. Has she given thought to how parliamentary questions can be laid and a Minister respond to scrutiny from the Chamber?

**Meg Hillier**: The Joint Committee gave some thought to this, and the view was that members of the Sponsor Body should come to the House as Members representing the example of the Commons Commission and others representing the Church Commissioners do to answer from the Back Benches. We learned from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) that the more open we are the better, so I would say that that infrequent appearance might not be enough, and at certain points in the project we might want to have far more open access both to Members of this House and the media, because it is not just Members of this House who need to know about it; this is a taxpayer-funded project that the people of the UK need to know about and they need to know that questions can be asked about it.

We need to make sure we scrutinise this fully and properly. I talked about the election of members to the Sponsor Body. We on the Committee wanted that, but the Government did not accept it. My one caveat about having elections is that we must make sure we have full balance across the House. I will probably want to press this in Committee, because we want to make sure that, for example, smaller parties such as the SNP are not disadvantaged if there is an open vote across the House and Members vote on party lines, as may happen. Given the excellent support and input of the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts and others, it would be invidious to cut out a Member because their party label meant they would not secure the votes. That must be considered, but of course in principle I support elections for all the reasons that others have highlighted.

The scrutiny of this project is vital. This House will scrutinise it, the Estimates Commission will put the proposals forward and, thanks to the mechanism worked up with the Procedure Committee through the Backbench Business Committee, we can get those estimates and discuss them and the detail here.

We have made sure that under the Bill the National Audit Office will have the powers to audit the Sponsor Body, the Delivery Authority and the project. The Public Accounts Committee will, as of right, be able to hold evidence sessions on the National Audit Office reports and examine the numbers in detail. I will no longer be the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee when all this happens, although I hope to have some input in the early stages. I am laying down a marker for my successors, however, because the length of the project means that at least another couple of Select Committee Chairs will be looking at this.

**Jamie Stone**: That is incredibly important advice. One thing that assisted us with the Holyrood project was getting public endorsement every so often that the books were fine. I stand full square behind what the hon. Lady has said.

**Meg Hillier**: The Comptroller and Auditor General at the National Audit Office is coming to the end of his term at the end of this month, and one item on my list of things to talk to the new Comptroller and Auditor General about is ensuring that there is a good and thorough process. Of course the National Audit Office does an excellent job, but we need to ensure that this is on its radar in the right timeframe and that we work up a way of ensuring that everything works effectively. We need to get in early to ensure that costs are not suddenly ramped up at the end.

I need to talk a bit about costs, and I will come to that in a moment. Other Select Committees will of course have the chance to examine these issues and, as the Leader of the House has said, there will be a further chance for this House to have a say in 2021. It is important that we build in scrutiny of the evaluation of, for example, the jobs and the money and of where the contracts are being let. In our speeches today, we have all been putting pressure on the Sponsor Body seriously to consider having a mechanism for ensuring that the wealth opportunities from this huge, amazing, international project are shared fairly across the UK wherever possible, and we must ensure that it is held to account for any pledges that it makes. We will hold its feet to the fire on this, and other Select Committees will have a role in that regard as well.

I want to touch on the northern estate. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, who is no longer in his place, suggested that it might be better not to glue that project to the main Palace project. However, my Committee believes that it is pretty vital that the Sponsor Body manages both projects, because they are so interconnected. The fact that the cloisters have now been empty for 18 months even though that was an urgent project is not a demonstration of a lack of will—there are many issues involved—but with all goodwill to the Clerks the House, they are not project managers of major projects. The whole point about the Sponsor Body is that it will have the expertise to hold those who deliver these big projects to account and to ensure that they get on with it. It is important that we also hand over the northern estate to a body of people who really have that expertise.

I am pleased that the Ministry of Defence car park issue now seems to be resolved, as it was getting ludicrous. The Committee was horriﬁed to discover that a delay in that area could have meant a three-year delay and hundreds of millions of pounds in extra costs. We will also get future office space and more ﬂexibility over the buildings as a result of any new buildings on the northern estate.

I remember when I visited New South Wales—I was there on holiday; this was not done at the taxpayer’s expense—I went to the head of the Sydney Olympics and was given the opportunity to visit the New South Wales culture minister. They had an amazing project to work with local businesses to help them to get ready to bid for projects on the Sydney Olympics. This helped businesses to learn how to procure and to work out a whole list of everything that would be needed on the Olympics. I would urge the Sponsor Body to adopt a similar approach, so that hon. Members who have already expressed an interest in bringing business, opportunities and work to their constituencies can show their local businesses what will be needed. For example, we will need to know how many woodcarvers and stone carvers will be needed, so that the people out there who know how to do those things can gear up and be ready when bidding for that work starts.
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am going to bring in the Opposition spokesman for his first appearance at the Dispatch Box since his election in 2001. I see that he has quite an audience. I call Mark Tami.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As you say, it is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box in 18 years—12 years as a Whip. I nearly got here on a Friday when the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) had a Bill. I was ready and primed, but he did not actually move the Bill, so there we are. Things come to those who wait. I also thank Matt Chorley at The Times’ “Red Box” newsletter for making my appearance his trivia question of the day.

I should state that I am a member of the shadow Sponsor Body, and it is a pleasure to serve on it with several other Members. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in today’s proceedings. The tone of the debate has been positive, which reflects the growing understanding that this project cannot wait. We really must get on with it and establish the appropriate governance arrangements.

Some Members have suggested that this not the right time to be doing this, which I suppose is understandable, but to some extent that is why we are here now. Quite frankly, it has never been the right time to do it. I can understand that Governments of whatever colour could say, “Well, we’d rather leave it to somebody else,” but that is what we have been doing since the second world war, when the roof and various other work was bodged, and we are paying the price for that today. If we had addressed some of those concerns many years ago, we may not be facing the problems that we have today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made some important points about planning, which I certainly have worries about. We must keep a firm eye on planning to ensure that it does not hold up the project, because if the northern estate project is delayed, everything else will suffer and the timescales will slip, as they have already.

The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), with whom I had the pleasure of serving on the Joint Committee on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings Bill, raised some important points, referring to the growing risk of delay. Like several other Members, she mentioned disability issues and the importance of doing whatever we can to make this place as disability-friendly as possible.

Now, where do I start with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)? I will be honest with him that he was fairly far down my list of people to vote for to be Speaker, but the idea of making him live in this place is suddenly very appealing.

The right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) spoke in great detail about some of the considerable problems we have to face. The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), with whom I have the pleasure of serving on the Administration Committee, stated how important it is to consider how people view this place—not only in this country, but around the world—and that the northern estate project should be placed under the Sponsor Body’s responsibility as soon as possible. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who like me has had the pleasure of serving on every R and R body so far, told us of his desire to have a modern Parliament within the current structures.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) raised his concerns about slippage and what he saw as the complex nature of the project’s governance. I agree with what he and other Members said about the cloisters. Speaking as the Opposition accommodation Whip, moving people out and causing all those problems only for us to walk past it every day to see that, in fact, nothing is happening is a lesson that we should learn for the future.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) told us of his experience in the Scottish Parliament, which is useful, although I do not think we will be taking his advice on buying desks. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) spoke of the need for honesty in costs and for getting on with addressing the problems we face.

A number of years ago, many of us believed that we could somehow carry on doing the work around us, but the evidence clearly points otherwise. Importantly, as a number of Members said, it is not just about us in the Chamber or those in the other place; it is about the thousands of people who work here—many of them work longer hours than we do at the moment—and the more than a million people who visit this place every year.

From a health and safety point of view, this building is simply not fit for purpose. We need to restore and renew it to be fit for the 21st century. I would suggest to any Member who has not done so that they visit the basement to view the extent of the challenge facing us.
It is not just below ground; it is above ground, too. A number of Members have spoken about how masonry is falling on a fairly regular basis, and we need only look at the netting around the building to understand the threat.

The biggest threat, and a number of Members have mentioned this, is fire. Although a lot of work has been done, we need only look at the terrible events at Notre Dame to realise how quickly a fire can take hold and threaten not only the entire structure of the building but, importantly, the people who work in it.

A key component of the proposed decant is the completion of the northern estate programme, which has perhaps gone somewhat under the radar, with a lot of the focus being on the Palace itself. The public consultation is under way, and I am sure many hon. Members have taken the opportunity to view the model or diorama—I never know the correct term—of Richmond House and the northern estate. I encourage Members who have not seen it to do so.

It is a bold design that will provide a positive legacy, with a building that can be adapted for a variety of uses, as well as office accommodation for Members of this House. There will be a second Chamber that we can hold in reserve, and we could use it for conferences and a whole host of uses that the Leader of the House has mentioned. It certainly will not be a white elephant. I think it will be a very useful part of this House.

I accept that the proposals for Richmond House are controversial and have generated interest. Some have argued that we should go to a different location, but I can assure the House, as the Leader of the House did, that a considerable amount of work went into considering numerous other locations. Again, if purely from a security point of view, Richmond House makes so much sense because it can easily be brought within the secure zone, which is a requirement that is, unfortunately, now far more important than it would have been a number of years ago—it is one of the key things that we have to think about. It is about protecting not only us, as Members, but all the people who work here, too.

We need to press ahead as quickly as possible with the northern estate project, which is central to the whole R and R programme. I am delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch that the dreaded MOD car park question will hopefully be solved, or has been solved, which should lessen the delay we were facing.

I would like to press the Minister on a key aspect of the R and R programme, about which a number of Members have spoken: legacy. I do not just mean the buildings, although they are important. I mean legacy in terms of the skills and apprenticeships that the programme will deliver—a legacy that should stretch far beyond London and the south-east.

The programme must be open to employees of businesses large and small across the UK. The procurement process needs to be fair and transparent, with companies across the country bidding for work. I hope that roadshows will go around the country explaining the opportunities. We cannot have a situation in which contracts are given to the same companies as always, which those giving the contracts are comfortable with. For all the talk about stretching out there, the rules and regulations can effectively debar smaller companies from entering the process.

This project may be based in London, but it must not be London-centric. Legacy must include better access for the public, improved educational facilities and the creation of new outreach spaces. As numerous Members have said, we must also make sure that the building is made as disabled-friendly as possible. That includes removing small stairways where we do not need them and also relates to the noise within the building. There are also issues that I had not thought about, to be frank. For partially sighted Members, clear glass doors with nothing on them are a major problem—we may think they look nice, but they can be a major obstacle. People across the House should be involved in looking at what we are going to do.

My personal experience as a member of the shadow Sponsor Board is that external board members—including Liz Peace, the excellent chair, who has been mentioned—play a positive and important role. Continuity is so important. I agree with other Members that there does not seem to be an allowance to enable existing members to go into the statutory body; they would have to go back through the process they went through a year ago. The danger is that we could lose that vital experience at a critical time for the project. At this point, I want to put on the record my thanks to Tom Healey, who has served the shadow Sponsor Board as director and is now returning to the House. He is a hard-working chap who has served us very well. I wish him all the best for the future.

In his opening remarks, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) highlighted five key areas to which I hope the Government will respond. The Opposition welcome the Bill today, and I wish it speedy progress. We have put off this vital work for 70 or perhaps 100 years. Let us be bold, let us be brave, and above all let us get on with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Minister, I want to make an announcement. There was a point of order about the written statement from the Ministry of Defence. It is not online, but copies are now available for Members to read.

4.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): My thanks go to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) on an assured début at the Dispatch Box. As a still relatively new Minister, it is nice to congratulate someone who has served for less time than I have.

The restoration and renewal of this historic Palace of Westminster is our duty to future generations of not just parliamentarians but of all who serve and take part in democracy in this country. The Bill is a vital step towards ensuring that we fulfil it. As many speakers have mentioned, we cannot underestimate this task. We have heard about the significant state of disrepair that the Palace is currently in. Anyone who has taken even a brief tour of the basement will have seen the scale of the project that we need to undertake and the desperate urgency of doing so.

The restoration and renewal programme is and will continue to be a parliamentary project. We will all have the opportunity to engage in the work and put forward our views on what improvements we would like to see.
for the Palace as a whole. All parliamentarians will have the opportunity to vote on the proposals for restoration and renewal in due course. This debate was an opportunity to hear what many people think, and it is only right that I start with the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside, who just spoke. He was absolutely right to talk about the need for this project to have a legacy. That legacy cannot just be revamped 19th-century buildings or better presented artworks; it has to be a legacy that stretches throughout the whole United Kingdom, in respect of job opportunities, apprenticeships for young people, the revival of skills and the reinvigoration of crafts that may not even exist at the moment.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I have sat through most of the debate and listened to Members talk about the need to start upskilling now. Will the Minister look into contacting, lobbying and working with further education institutions, including in my constituency—

Chris Bryant: And mine.

Chris Elmore: And, indeed, in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and in the constituencies of all Members from across the House. That way, we can start to look at upskilling and at what FE provision is there now, and FE institutions can start to develop course plans and to introduce lecturers and so on, so that we get those skills ready for when the project happens.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that passionate advert for the skills of residents in Ogmore. I have also heard from the Rhondda, from Bury St Edmunds, from Aldridge-Brownhills, from Bournemouth, from South Northamptonshire and everywhere else. The hon. Gentleman is right: one reason why I am keen to get on with this and get the Delivery Authority set up is that, as we saw with the Olympics in 2012, there will be benefits throughout the country. In 2012, businesses in his constituency and in mine benefited, either through the supply or through direct contracts. The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside made the point well that this project might be happening in London, but it should not be a London-centric project. I will certainly be keen to see us extending skills.

Neil Gray: The Minister speaks of his commitment to this not being a London-centric project. I am sure he will have already heard our proposals for a nations and regions capital fund, and I am sure that capital funding would be welcome in Devon and the south-west. Does he agree in principle with the idea of such a fund?

Kevin Foster: Of course, as the Bill progresses, the Government will be interested to hear all proposals that come forward. Let us consider the work that is already going on. For example, the cast-iron tiles on the Elizabeth Tower are being produced in the Sheffield area, and the tiles for the encaustic tile conservation project have been manufactured at a factory in Shropshire. There will be plenty of opportunities for businesses throughout these four nations that make up this United Kingdom to be part of a project that all nations will be able to look to over the coming decades.

Let me turn to the detail of the views expressed today. I shall start with the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who opened the debate for the Opposition. I thank him for his constructive approach. He was an excellent stand-in for the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whose name appears on the Bill in a sign of the consensus we have been able to achieve. I recognise some of his points about opportunities for skills and education arising from the work. It is about making sure that businesses know how to put themselves forward. There are plenty of models—for example, Heathrow airport is currently working on trying to spread its supply chain throughout the United Kingdom. I hope the Delivery Authority will be able to learn from that, although we need to get the thing set up, via the Bill, before it can.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) was an excellent Chair of the prelegislative scrutiny Committee. I pay tribute to the work that she and her Committee did to enable us to bring forward the Bill. She was right to highlight the fact that disability access in this building is from another era. The facilities reflect different attitudes to those with disabilities—not just in the visible examples, such as staircases that are hard or impossible for anyone with mobility issues to climb, or in those hidden aspects that make this building not the place for accessibility that it should be. Let us be blunt: we stand in the Chamber and argue that businesses and public services should be accessible, but we need to make sure that the building in which we do that arguing sets the bar, rather than just meeting a minimum standard.

As the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside said, it is interesting to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). To anyone who raises the potential for spending on this project, I say that the alternative is not to spend nothing. The alternative is to carry on with a make-do-and-mend process, which is not making do and which is not going to mend the place. Public money will still end up being spent in great amounts on this building, achieving worse outcomes. I would certainly reflect on the contrast between some of those remarks and the role that the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) has played as part of the commission. Again, this is a choice about how we deal with the pressing issues of this building. There is no question of them not being dealt with at all.

Pete Wishart rose—

Kevin Foster: I will briefly give way as I referred to the hon. Gentleman.

Pete Wishart: When I was making my speech, the Minister was, I think, at an Adjournment debate elsewhere so I am surprised that he is even able to make a comment on these matters. I am not suggesting that at all. I agree that we have to do something with this building, but let us be imaginative about where we decant to and what we come back to. We do not always have to do the same things again and again and again.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course I take an interest in the remarks that have been made. These works have been looked at on many occasions by professional advisers who are coming up with appropriate things. We can all talk about being imaginative, but the reality is that there has been a great deal of analysis that has gone into this project.
Come 2021, the House will again be able to scrutinise the detail of business cases, to take votes based on real estimates and to scrutinise the estimates to ensure that everyone has the information that they need to make a decision.

Nick Smith: On this topic of possible cost overruns, a number of colleagues have talked about the possibility of the northern estate being delayed because of planning problems, which could be very expensive indeed. Can the Minister tell us more about that possibility and how we are going to reduce that risk?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. On planning, he will be aware that this project will follow the usual planning rules. We do not intend to make Parliament a special case; we will still liaise with Westminster City Council. On the detail in relation to the northern estate, I am happy to write to him and also place a copy of that letter in the Library. That would enable me to give him a detailed reply to his concerns. I am conscious though that, when we engage with the city council, we will do so as any other applicant would. We must be very clear that we are not setting ourselves in a special place because we are the UK Parliament.

Let me move on now to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin). He quite rightly pointed out that, if this building were in private hands, we would insist on its repair via the law that we pass. That also applies in terms of conserving its heritage. I also pay tribute to the role that he plays on the shadow Sponsor Body, bringing his considerable experience of Parliament to bear in doing so.

It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I know that, like me, he also managed to nip into the other debate to make a contribution, showing his passion for his work. Again, mention was made of his work on the Joint Committee of 2016. It was almost as if we managed to duplicate ourselves to ensure that we could achieve the feat of being in two places at once. We appreciate the comments that were made, especially the ones around planning, but again I have to say that there is a difference between these works and the works of the Olympics in terms of not having four different projects and of not having four different planning authorities. Again I say, it would be a low step for Parliament to look to put itself above other procedures and other organisations dealing with similar buildings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) talked about the iconic nature of this building and the vast scale of the task—no one can underestimate the vast scale of the task. On the nature of this building, I sometimes make the point on a tour that this is probably one of the few places that literally has history attached to a broom cupboard because of what happened on the night of the 1911 census. Again, it rams home the fact that every part of this building were in private hands, we would insist on its repair via the law that we pass. That also applies in terms of conserving its heritage. I also pay tribute to the role that he plays on the shadow Sponsor Body, bringing his considerable experience of Parliament to bear in doing so.

It is extremely important that we make progress with the restoration and renewal project so that we can secure this historic Palace for future generations. That is why I am pleased that the House passed the motions in 2018 voting for a full decant, and why I am pleased that this Bill is being debated today. As the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster said in its report, the Sponsor Body will need to set clear timelines for completing the vital works. It is very much my hope that we move back into this historic and iconic building as swiftly as possible afterwards. Indeed, the Bill provides for this. At the point that we vote on the design and funding for the project, we will have a better understanding of the timescales and will be proceeding—if it is the decision of the House—based on that timetable. If the timetable or costs shift significantly, the House will have the opportunity to vote again.

Concerns have rightly been raised about the cost of this project, and we are determined to ensure that the R and R programme represents best value for money for the taxpayer. That will be the guiding principle as we take this Bill forward. We are confident that the governance arrangements set out in the Bill can and will deliver the necessary restoration works while guaranteeing value for money for the taxpayer, as there is not an unlimited amount of available funds.

Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who said that we can explore that matter in the Bill Committee. The Government’s view is that, while there will be some engagement with the Treasury, a Minister being on the board could confuse the roles and may not necessarily be the best way of ensuring that this project progresses.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), as always, gave a passionate speech showing his great knowledge and skill, and making very clear the risks that we are running if we decide not to grasp this nettle. He talked us through the options. I know he has been a passionate proponent of particular outcomes for this project, but it is right that whatever option we look to take—whatever our thoughts on particular aspects of the project—we move on with this Bill and set up the Delivery Authority to allow it to happen.

It was interesting to hear the experience of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) with the Scottish Parliament building. I actually saw the desk to which he referred only last week when I visited my opposite number in the Scottish Government. The hon. Gentleman is probably right to say that there will be some flak along the way in this project; that is almost inevitable. However, he is also right to say that this needs to be a project across the whole Union, not just one for the normal contractors, and that it should be something in which we can all take pride.

I found the comments of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch particularly interesting, as she outlined the role that the Public Accounts Committee will look to play in overseeing this work. As she reflected, it was the work of the hon. Lady and her Committee that persuaded many Members to vote for the motion, given that the House supported her amendment by a majority and then supported the substantive motion that has brought us to where we are today. I am sure that many Members of the House will hope that such an approach will continue.

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Concerns have rightly been raised about the cost of this project, and we are determined to ensure that the R and R programme represents best value for money for the taxpayer. That will be the guiding principle as we take this Bill forward. We are confident that the governance arrangements set out in the Bill can and will deliver the necessary restoration works while guaranteeing value for money for the taxpayer, as there is not an unlimited amount of available funds.
The Bill puts in place a number of core financial safeguards that have been signed off by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. To mention just a few: Parliament will be given an opportunity to vote on the annual expenditure of the Sponsor Body; the Estimates Commission will have the power to reject draft estimates if the project is going over budget; the Comptroller and Auditor General will conduct annual financial audits in relation to both the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority; and of course has the relationship with the Public Accounts Committee that the Committee’s Chair touched on in her speech; and finally, Parliament will vote on the cost of the substantive building works. The Government are clear that the work must represent good value for taxpayers’ money, and the programme needs to be delivered on time and on budget.

The R and R programme is at its heart, and will continue to be, a parliamentary project. That is why the Bill ensures that parliamentarians have a clear voice as members of the Sponsor Body, and establishes a specific duty on the Sponsor Body to consult with parliamentarians on strategic objectives for the restoration and renewal works. Parliament will also have a significant role in approving the proposals for the works, including the scope, delivery method and cost.

The importance of engaging the public has also been mentioned, and I completely agree that the public need to have a clear voice in this historic project about the Parliament that represents them. This project will provide an unparalleled opportunity to get the public to engage with Parliament and democracy—both during the programme and through providing a lasting legacy. How we engage the public in R and R is ultimately for the Sponsor Body to define, working alongside the Delivery Authority. However, the Sponsor Body will have the chance to engage innovatively with the wider public about restoration and renewal, and I would expect that to be across the entire United Kingdom, as I touched on earlier.

If I may sum up, this Bill ensures that we establish the governance bodies that will be able—

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Foster: Briefly.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I want to put to him the point that has been put to him by several members of the Sponsor Body. The Bill says that we will have to undertake a new recruitment process for the new Sponsor Body as opposed to the shadow Sponsor Body. I realise that he may not be able to give me a definitive answer at the moment, but may I ask him to understand the concern that has been expressed in all parts of the House about this particular clause, bearing in mind that the people who are taking on this role at the moment, and will continue to do so, were recruited only after a proper process in 2018? Those of us who feel that this is important would like them to carry on with that job for some time. I think that to go through the whole appointment process again would be a mistake.

Kevin Foster: I hear the point made by my right hon. Friend. The Government remain open-minded on this and will clearly consider the comments made as the Bill progresses through the House. I hear the strength of the representations that he has made, and they will certainly be taken on board as the Bill progresses. As I say, it is ultimately a matter for the House to determine.

This Bill ensures that we establish the governance bodies that will be able to deliver on this project in a timely and cost-effective manner. This will enable our return to this Palace to conduct parliamentary business, ensure continued and more inclusive public engagement through increased accessibility, and fulfil our responsibility to secure for future generations this historic grade I listed building—a building that has seen moments of history take place within it. Ultimately, the Bill ensures that the proper mechanisms are in place to enable the restoration and renewal works on the Palace of Westminster to be conducted with the expertise and safeguards that are necessary for a project of this magnitude both in size and historical significance.

It is a privilege to support the Second Reading of this Bill. I look forward to working with colleagues in Committee to take it forward. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second Time.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Prime Minister is giving a speech outside Parliament. Can you give me guidance on why it is not being done in this Parliament? Are we now just going to have a social media Parliament?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I understand the point he makes. He will have heard, as the House has heard many times, Mr Speaker insisting that any important announcements that are made by Ministers should be made first here in the Chamber and not elsewhere. But it is my understanding, having listened to the Prime Minister’s press conference this afternoon, that she has every intention of coming to this House tomorrow and making a statement when all Members will have the opportunity to ask the appropriate questions. I hope that sets the hon. Gentleman’s mind at rest.
(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Mr Jack.)

Question agreed to.

PARLIAMENTARY BUILDINGS (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL) BILL (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body under or by virtue of the Act, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Mr Jack.)

Question agreed to.

Christmas Island Nuclear Testing: Compensation

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

5.13 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): William Caldwell was a 19-year-old merchant seaman when he was sent from Glasgow to Newcastle to join the crew of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Wave Sovereign. He thought he would be refuelling warships for the Pakistani and Indian navies, and in August 1957 he boarded, carrying his worldly possessions in a hold-all. He knew nothing of the Indian ocean, and far less of Christmas Island. However, William was about to find himself at the epicentre of Britain’s nuclear testing programme.

Operation Grapple was four series of British tests of atomic and hydrogen bombs carried out in 1957 and 1958 at Malden Island and Kiritimati—Christmas Island—in the Pacific ocean as part of the British hydrogen bomb programme. Nine nuclear explosions took place, culminating in the United Kingdom becoming the third recognised possessor of thermonuclear weapons and the restoration of the special relationship with the United States, with the 1958 US-UK mutual defence agreement.

I first heard William’s story when his son Robert visited my office in Glasgow. He told us of his father’s memories of the Grapple Y test on 28 April 1958. William was down below when they were ordered on to deck. He hurried up wearing only sandals and shorts. The crew were told that they were going to witness something special that nobody else had seen and that it was important to cover their eyes with their hands until after the flash. At that point, the Wave Sovereign was about 12 miles from the detonation site. William vividly remembered being both astounded and horrified when he saw the bones of his hands lit up in utter clarity, as though he was looking at an X-ray.

William remembered the cloud. The crew remained on deck to watch with dark fascination as the cloud formed and remained suspended in the sky above them. A particularly upsetting thing for William’s son Robert is how much the vision of this cloud haunted his father. Having and raising a family provided William with a distraction, but as his children grew up and he got older, this memory began to trouble him greatly, and he had many nightmares about the cloud.

Those on board the Wave Sovereign were exposed to gamma and beta radiation from the initial blast and then nuclear fallout, which included alpha particles. Alpha particles are the most ionising, and therefore most dangerous, of nuclear radiations, but they cannot penetrate far and can easily be stopped by a single sheet of paper, or indeed protective clothing. However, if they are ingested in water, food or air, they can wreak havoc on the body’s DNA. After the cloud went up, a black rain fell, followed by dead fish floating to the surface of the water. The crew netted those fish and ate them, delighted by the convenience of their bounty and unaware of the risks.

But Britain was aware of the risks before the tests began. Historical documents released from state archives show that in 1951, William Penney, the chief scientist at
Aldermaston, demanded insurance for scientific staff in case any developed radiogenic diseases. Admiral Arthur Torlesse said that he would only order his men into danger “in the knowledge that the Admiralty accept liability for those killed or injured on duty”.

On 20 May 1953, the Defence Research Policy Committee discussed how troops would be affected by the blasts. It said: “The Army must discover the detailed effects of various types of explosion on equipment, stores and men with and without various types of protection.”

In 1955, Prime Minister Anthony Eden was warned that if scientists were to build an H-bomb, it could damage troops’ DNA. A letter headed “10 Downing Street” and dated 14 November says:

“The Prime Minister saw the report from Sir Harold Himsworth about the report of the Committee considering the genetic effects of Nuclear Radiation. His comment was: ‘A pity, but we cannot help it.’”

In a draft report ahead of Grapple Y, Air Commodore Denis Wilson, the senior medical officer on the taskforce, said that he expected servicemen to die. He wrote:

“It is emphasised that in the event of the expected yield being obtained or increased there will almost certainly be in addition to considerable material damage, casualties to individuals, and this should be taken into consideration.”

William’s health problems began shortly after. Following an unrelated accident on board the Wave Sovereign, he was taken to a military hospital, and from there had to pay to be transported home on board an RAF bomber.

After four years of stomach problems, in 1962 he underwent an operation to remove an ulcer, but it was discovered that his stomach was so badly damaged that half of it would have to be removed. Coincidently—or, indeed, not—another test veteran, Ken McGinley, who went on to establish the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, required the same operation in 1962. This is a pattern we do see repeated.

In response to the health concerns of some nuclear test veterans in the 1980s, the Ministry of Defence commissioned three studies of mortality and cancer among nuclear test personnel. These were conducted by the independent National Radiological Protection Board. Three analyses were carried out. The latest report, published in 2003, concluded that overall levels of mortality and cancer incidence in nuclear test veterans have continued to be like those in a matched service control group and lower than in the general population.

These findings form the basis of the war pension scheme policy on nuclear test veteran claims. However, there are three glaring problems: this takes no account of non-cancerous health problems, and in fact William’s stomach problem was not considered under that scheme; it does not consider the health conditions of the offspring of test veterans; and it does not include RFA personnel who were present in a support capacity. Currently, there is no specific compensation fund for this group of veterans, whose numbers are dwindling.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very good speech. When I was the Under-Secretary of State for Defence in 2009, a settlement proposal was made to the test veterans’ lawyers. Having reviewed the file recently, I can confirm that the barrister did pass that over, but for some reason the very generous settlement offer was refused.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I am happy to look into that and ask questions about it.

Veterans’ numbers are dwindling, but there are thoughts to be about 130,000 descendants, who report 10 times the normal level of birth defects, organ malformations and leukaemia. William’s children all suffer from bone or spinal problems, and his granddaughter’s hips were back to front when she was born. However, the MOD continues to deny liability. In 2007, research from New Zealand proved that genetic damage in veterans was three times worse than in survivors of the Chernobyl disaster. Despite Britain agreeing to pay Australia £20 million to settle claims arising from nuclear contamination, the Government fight such compensation claims at home.

In response to a parliamentary question from the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) last year, the Minister set out the eligibility for claims. He said:

“Any veteran who believes they have suffered ill health due to Service is eligible to claim no-fault compensation under the War Pensions Scheme. War Pensions are payable in respect of illness or injury due to Service in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces before 6 April 2005, with the benefit of reasonable doubt always given to the claimant. Decisions are medically certified and follow consideration of Service and medical evidence and carry full rights of appeal to an independent tribunal. Where the evidence supports a causal link to Service, entitlement will be given.”

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentioned Australia and the compensation that was paid to veterans and indigenous Australians as a result of tests there. Is she aware that the amount offered—£20 million—is considered pathetically inadequate?

Carol Monaghan: That is of course the point I was making, and I do not for a moment suggest that that comes anywhere near what would be required properly to compensate people there. The point I am making is that there is an admission of guilt within that.

It is difficult enough to prove the causal link between service and illness for nuclear test veterans, but for a merchant seaman on board a Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service vessel, supporting the military operation, there is not even the ability to access a war pension. Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish addressed that issue during his time as Minister for war pensions. He wrote to Mr McGinley of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, stating that anyone who was present at the tests, even in a support capacity, would be considered, for the purpose of war pensions, a veteran. However, that classification has never been recognised.

William was told by the Navy that he was not in hostile waters and therefore could not be considered a veteran. The civil service has said that because he was not on board for more than two years—which, due to his unrelated injury, could not happen—he could not be considered for a civil service pension. My predecessor, John Robertson, was also involved in William’s case, and through his intervention William did receive his veteran’s pin; but that is no compensation for the decades where the state has simply ignored his contribution.
Canadian servicemen were ordered to lie in trenches while the tests were carried out; they have secured compensation. American servicemen who witnessed explosions over land were compensated in Reagan’s famous scheme, but it appears that Britain is the last nuclear power on earth to deny that its own nuclear weapons are capable of causing its service personnel any harm.

Following a long campaign by the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, £25 million was allocated from LIBOR funds to finance an aged veterans fund to alleviate suffering and increase wellbeing. The aged veterans fund went live in April 2016 and the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, through its nuclear community charity fund, received approval to launch an initial portfolio of five projects benefiting the nuclear community. That has been welcomed by the community, but it is a million miles from the compensation that those veterans and their families deserve. Men were deliberately used as guinea pigs in a macabre scientific experiment, and their health was sacrificed simply to prove our worth to America.

I would ask the Minister, first, if William was a civilian, how was it that he ended up in Christmas Island without any say in his deployment? Secondly, what plans do the Government have to admit their responsibility in this episode and compensate all those affected—military and support crew? Finally, when can we expect the Government to honour Lord Mackay’s classification of RFA personnel as veterans?

Sadly, William Caldwell died last year, but his son Robert continues to fight for what his family are owed—an admission of guilt, an apology from the Government and financial recompense for the years of suffering this family have experienced, and continue to experience. But Robert takes some small comfort in knowing that his father is now at peace from the nightmares.

5.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing the debate. She raises a very sensitive matter, which has been brought to this House on many occasions.

Before I go into the detail of the subject matter, it is important for us to understand that this is not a question of the thermonuclear testing and Britain’s decision to use and develop a nuclear deterrent, although our parties may have different opinions on that; this is to do with the actual positioning—the geographical location—and the manner in which the tests were conducted in the south Pacific in the 1950s.

The hon. Lady spoke about Operation Grapple—the decision to pursue a nuclear deterrent. That did involve the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service, who, I make it very clear, are civilians; they are not part of our armed forces in that sense. It is important that we express and put on record on behalf of the House our gratitude for what they do, not just then but today. Without them, it would not be possible for our Navy—our naval ships—to maintain the food, fuel, stores and ammunition that they require to keep our seas safe and protect our shores. We are very grateful to all those who serve in the Royal Navy and in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. In present times, the RFA provides logistical support in the areas I have just mentioned and are involved in humanitarian operations, disaster relief and help with counter-piracy.

This debate focuses on a very sensitive issue and I know there are strong feelings on both sides of the House. It is a highly complicated issue, so it is worth breaking the subject matter down into three separate stages. The first stage relates to the facts of the matter. The UK’s atmospheric nuclear test programme experimented on weapons, not personnel. The weapons were the focus of the operations in the south Pacific. Many thousands of service personnel deployed to the south Pacific, including Christmas Island, from 1956 to 1961, were in support of testing the UK’s first thermonuclear weapon system. The hon. Lady alluded to 17 RFA ships being deployed in support of operations. None was exposed to direct radiation beyond the background radiation that was expected. Only the Royal Navy’s HMS Diana came into direct contact with radiation, as she was expressly required to sail through the nuclear plume after the explosion had taken place.

Carol Monaghan: That simply is not the case, as I explained in my speech. The Wave Sovereign was there. It was present. The crew were on board and the crew witnessed the blast.

Mr Ellwood: I am not denying that they were in the vicinity. It is the distance and proximity to the explosion that we are talking about. It is worth putting it in context. Other nations went through these experiments. It is difficult to compare apples with pears regarding the proximity of any of the individuals who witnessed the tests. I simply make it clear that the locality of the ships, in comparison with HMS Diana, was very different indeed. That is all I can say about that.

Other Royal Navy and RFA vessels were located in safe zones many, many miles away from the bomb’s ground zero—or surface zero, as it is called at sea—from which it was detonated. The role of the RFA vessels was to restock and refuel Royal Navy support ships that were closer to it. They were withdrawn from those locations before detonation. Otherwise, radiation risk to Royal Navy and RFA crews, and all other participants, was low, with prevention measures that reflected best practice in the contemporary understanding of the day.

The second point relates to the subsequent reports and investigations. As I mentioned, this issue has been looked at in the past. Protection, health and welfare of all those involved in the tests were in place, and that is confirmed by well-documented safety measures and monitoring during the tests. To date, there is no expert evidence of excess illness or mortality among nuclear test veterans in general that could be linked to their participation in the tests.

In response to health concerns raised in the 1980s, the Government commissioned an independent study from the National Radiological Protection Board. This looked at mortality for all causes, as well as cancer incidence and mortality. Three reports followed in 1988, 1993 and 2003, which compared over 20,000 participants in nuclear tests with a similar-sized control group of non-deployed service personnel. They found no detectable effect on participants’ life expectancy or risk of developing most cancers, but did find a small increase in the risk of leukaemia, excluding chronic lymphatic leukaemia, with
clinical onset in the first 25 years after presence at the tests. A fourth report is now expected next spring. Should those findings produce new evidence, with new ways of measuring such things, that will be reflected in policy.

Carol Monaghan: One issue that I raised was the offspring of test veterans. It seems that they are not being included in the medical tests, but we know that the incidence of leukaemia and other cancers in their offspring is 10 times that of the general population.

Mr Ellwood: Because it is an independent study, I do not have the details of the fourth report, but I will write to the hon. Lady to confirm whether the offspring are included. I hope that they are. It would make sense, because often these things can get passed down, as we saw with the tests after Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Mr Kevan Jones: On the family risk, as part of the compensation that was offered and never taken forward, a study was done in, I think, 2009 of family members. The Minister may well want to look at that study. If he wants access to that file, it is under my papers and I am quite happy to give him the authorisation.

Mr Ellwood: The fact that the right hon. Gentleman had to deal with this when he was a Defence Minister reflects how long this issue has been alive. I would be grateful for any further information that helped us. Ultimately, we want to do the best we can for those who are serving and who have served.

On the pension and compensation issues that are involved, the Government’s policy on claims arising from nuclear test programmes is based on detailed and impartial analysis of world literature, including the National Radiological Protection Board reports. A revised MOD policy statement for armed forces personnel was published in December 2017, and it takes into account scientific studies that have been published since 2003. It is important to make it clear that the Government do not accept in general that those present at sites were exposed to harmful levels of ionising radiation. RFA personnel are covered by the mercantile marine scheme, based on the personal injury civilian scheme, which was extant during world war two. Like the scheme, the MMS applies only in wartime to war injuries and is extant during world war two. The UK atmospheric tests were a peacetime operation, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is absolutely correct that this was a peacetime operation, and I thank the Minister for the thoughtful way he is taking us through this issue. I was approached by an elderly constituent who was there—he was serving in the armed forces at the time—and he had to turn his back and all the rest of it. He said, “I’ve not been ill”, but he did say, “All my teeth fell out not terribly long after the test.” The point he put to me was that because it was peacetime, there was no idea of any campaign medal or decoration for those who were there, but he asked whether any other consideration could be given by the MOD, such as perhaps a letter signed by the Minister or somebody, saying, “You were there and we recognise your contribution.”

Mr Ellwood: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, perhaps one to one, to discuss that. The issue of medals is always sensitive. As he is aware, many campaign groups are seeking to provide recognition for valour and conduct in peace and war operations. Recognition of service is always very important. Thanks to our predecessors, we are able to enjoy the freedoms that we do, so I would be delighted to meet him to discuss that further.

I stress that RFA personnel are civilian and not military and, therefore, they come under a different form of compensation. They are covered by the industrial injuries disability scheme and are certainly entitled to claim civilian damages, should they wish to pursue that, but that is separate from the strand of support and compensation that those in the armed forces would pursue.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): This debate is about establishing compensation and giving those veterans or the people in the vicinity justice. Does the Minister think that justice has happened at this point?

Mr Ellwood: I am not a lawyer and it is not for me to make those judgments; it is for me to clarify— [Interruption.] I will not be pressed to give a judgment—that would be wrong. I am sorry the hon. Gentleman feels this point?

Mr Ellwood: I am not a lawyer and it is not for me to make those judgments; it is for me to clarify— [Interruption.] I will not be pressed to give a judgment—that would be wrong. I am sorry the hon. Gentleman feels this point?

Mr Ellwood: I am not a lawyer and it is not for me to make those judgments; it is for me to clarify— [Interruption.] I will not be pressed to give a judgment—that would be wrong. I am sorry the hon. Gentleman feels this point?

This is an important issue and one that concerns me. We must provide clarity in the upcoming fourth report. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for addressing these matters this evening. The Government continue to recognise the work of all those who participated in the British nuclear testing programme, both civilian and RFA personnel and those in the armed forces. They contributed a great deal to keeping our nation secure during the cold war and since by ensuring the UK was equipped with the appropriate nuclear capability. I assure the entire House that the Government will continue to monitor closely the health risks to participants, and we look forward to the fourth report, which is expected to be published next year.

Carol Monaghan: I raised the recognition by Lord MacKay that RFA personnel would be considered as veterans for the purpose of war pensions. The Minister has not addressed that. I wonder whether he will before he finishes.

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady in more detail. It was my plan to do that anyway after this debate. She has raised several points. I do not have all the details now, but I would be happy to share them with her in closer context, and I will certainly look at this issue. I would again make the distinction between the different models of support that apply to people in civilian and military roles, which I alluded to earlier, but I would happy to write to her with more details.

Question put and agreed to.

5.41 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Security Situation

1. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland.

2. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The threat from dissident republican terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland after the appalling killing of Lyra McKee. This Government’s first priority is to keep people safe and secure. Vigilance against this continuing threat is essential, and we remain determined to ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

Rebecca Pow: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the £105 million of UK Government funding for the new Derry/Londonderry city deal and the inclusive future fund. Does she agree that it is vital that we provide young people with the jobs and skills they need to move on in the future in a world that is rejecting violence and that all these things will help?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am sure that she will have heard the words of Father Martin Magill at the funeral of Lyra McKee; he said that young people need jobs, not guns. It is exactly right that we should focus our efforts on providing jobs as well as tackling terrorism, so that we can give those young people the alternative to violence so that they can have a future that is fit for them.

Mark Menzies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is doing an outstanding job and showing tremendous courage and professionalism in dealing with violence and dissident activity? What can the Government do to support the PSNI to ensure that it faces down the dissidents and people who are spreading hatred and violence?

Karen Bradley: I have seen that the PSNI conducts a very difficult job. I am always pleased to have the chance to meet police officers—particularly at Strand Road in Londonderry, where I have made a number of visits following dreadful incidents that we have seen in that city—and to hear the camaraderie and commitment shown by those individuals. I am determined that we will deal with the matters regarding the legacy of Operation Banner appropriately, lawfully and in a way that reflects exactly the commitment that we see today from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.
Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Is not one of the challenges for dealing with the security situation in Northern Ireland to build the confidence of communities right across Northern Ireland, working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and others? In the face of recent terrible events, we have seen the community doing that, but what more can the Secretary of State do to encourage communities to work with the security forces?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman, I know, has great experience in this area and he is right that we do need to see co-operation between communities and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. We did see a real step change following that appalling killing where people were welcoming the PSNI into their homes, but it is an incredibly difficult job. We need to make sure that the inclusive future fund—the £55 million that the Government have committed to Derry/Londonderry—is used in part to support those activities.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the security situation depends on, among other things, the perception that the police and the judicial process are independent. Families of victims of the troubles of the past are, in many cases, still waiting for answers. Does she agree that those families, and those young people who can be pulled into terrorist acts, would be influenced dramatically if they believed that there was a rule saying that there would be a statute saying that there would be a statute of limitations for state actors when, quite rightly, we seek to prosecute those who perpetrated either murder or manslaughter from whatever background?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will know that this Government are committed to implementing the institutions that were agreed at Stormont House. We have had a consultation on that matter and received more than 17,000 responses—individual personal responses. We will publish the summary of those consultation responses in due course.

Employment Trends

3. Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of employment in Northern Ireland. [910953]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I am happy to confirm that the latest labour market statistics for Northern Ireland show employment at a record high and unemployment at a record low. This is a long-term and consistently improving trend, and with continued political stability, we hope that it will continue in future.

Neil O’Brien: Those are very welcome statistics. What is my hon. Friend doing to further grow employment and jobs in Northern Ireland and the rest of the country?

John Penrose: I am delighted to give some examples. Not only is unemployment now the lowest of the UK nations, at 2.9%, but the ratio of public sector to private sector jobs is rebalancing healthily. Exports have grown to more than £10 billion, and we expect a tourism surge from the golf open at Portrush. We will continue to pursue those and other measures, including the city deals that have just been mentioned.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Employment levels are improving, as the Minister has said, but does he agree that we need to attract above-average salary levels now to try to grow the economy? In that respect, the Heathrow logistics hub is an excellent project. Will he join me in pressing and persuading those behind the hub to look at Ballykelly, which is a very attractive environment?

John Penrose: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty battler for his constituents and for his constituency. I am sure that those involved will have heard his words and will be considering them carefully, but he is right about that and many other examples of important local investment in Northern Ireland.

Devolved Government

4. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910954]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The short, focused set of roundtable talks aimed at restoring devolution continues. Northern Ireland’s five main political parties have reaffirmed their commitment to restoring a power-sharing Executive and the other political institutions set out in the Belfast agreement.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer and for the work that she has done thus far. Does she agree that it is absolutely vital to get devolved government up and working as soon as possible, so that the victims of historical institutional abuse receive full and fair compensation for what they have suffered?

Karen Bradley: I do agree with my hon. Friend. That is my hon. Friend’s commitment and I am determined to make this move as fast as possible. I do not shy away in any way from my responsibilities in this area, and I am absolutely determined that we will act as soon as we can. The two years the right hon. Gentleman referred to is an estimate by the civil service of Northern Ireland; it is not an estimate that I have put forward. As he will know, following the
end of the consultation that I asked the head of the civil service in Northern Ireland to conduct, a number of decisions need to be taken—decisions that require ministerial input. I have asked the five parties in Northern Ireland to assist me in getting a resolution to those questions as soon as possible, so that I can act as soon as possible, as I am determined to do.

Nigel Dodds: The Secretary of State will be aware that this is one but probably the most terrible example of a whole series of decisions that have cross-community and cross-party support but that she has refused to do anything about, even though this place and her Government are responsible for the administration of Northern Ireland. The fact of the matter is that people are being told that she has now placed another series of questions that need to be answered, and people see this as further delay. What are the questions that she now wants further answers to, who originated those questions, when did they first come to her—when were they put on her desk—and why is this being used as further reason to delay the proper process of compensation for these victims?

Karen Bradley: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Gentleman—he is an honourable man who works very hard for his constituents and for Northern Ireland—but I disagree with him on this matter. The head of the civil service and Executive Office has put forward 15 questions I disagree with him on this matter. The head of the civil service in Northern Ireland, David Sterling, has asked the five parties in Northern Ireland to conduct, a number of decisions need to be taken—decisions that require ministerial input. I have asked the five parties in Northern Ireland to assist me in getting a resolution to those questions as soon as possible, so that I can act as soon as possible, as I am determined to do.

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Karen Bradley: I have said on many occasions that I am prepared to do the legislation wherever it is quickest that we do it. I want to see redress for these victims as soon as possible. But there are some fundamental questions that David Sterling has posed that we need to answer. I am merely asking them if they will help me to answer the questions that David Sterling has posed to me to enable me to take this to the next stage so that we can deliver for the victims as soon as possible.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The head of the civil service in Northern Ireland, David Sterling, has asked for legislation to be made in this place. When the Secretary of State talks about action on historical institutional abuse, is she talking about bringing legislation through this House?

Karen Bradley: I have said on many occasions that I am prepared to do the legislation wherever it is quickest that we do it. I want to see redress for these victims as soon as possible. But there are some fundamental questions that David Sterling has posed that need answers, and I will get to those answers more quickly if I have the support and co-operation of the parties in Northern Ireland in working with me.

15. [910965] Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand the level of outrage that there is about this? It has been two years since the inquiry reported. Thirty survivors of institutional abuse have died since then. The victims were told this week that they might have to wait another two years before anything is done. Will she act, and act now, so that these good people can get some sense of justice before more of them die?

Karen Bradley: I know the sense of outrage. I have met those victims. I want to see action. It is quite right that the parties in Northern Ireland, when they were in government, set up this inquiry. It is absolutely right that they did that, and I applaud them for doing so. There is an opportunity for us to make progress on this quickly, but I cannot do it alone. I need the guidance and support of those in the parties in Northern Ireland, because ultimately they will be the Ministers who will have to implement whatever institutions and whatever system is created. I need their support so that we can make progress quickly. I am not delaying anything. I am determined to act for these people, and I will do whatever it takes to do so.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The House will be aware that today, to the very day, is the 21st anniversary of that occasion when a sunshine ray of hope pierced the dark clouds in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement was ratified, and we must give the victims and survivors some of that hope. Their agony is becoming unendurable. I do not doubt the good nature and the good will of the Secretary of State. She met the survivors, as did I. But we cannot—we must not—wait for another two years. It would be impossible—unconscionable—for us to do so. Thirty-six have already died; we cannot let more die. I can assure the Secretary of State that she will have the support of Labour Members, but can she please bring this forward and end the agony and the misery of these survivors and victims?

Karen Bradley: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s offer of support. We spoke about this matter yesterday. I am determined to take this forward as quickly as possible. It would be good to work with him in addressing the fundamental questions that need a response before legislation can be finalised. We are also working with Sir Anthony Hart to get answers to those questions, because we need to get this right. There is no point doing this in haste if we fail to deliver for the people who deserve redress as soon as possible.

Confidence and Supply Agreement

5. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Prime Minister on the continuation of the Government’s confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party. [910955]

6. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Prime Minister on the continuation of the Government’s confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party. [910956]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The Secretary of State has not had any meetings with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the confidence and supply agreement. The agreement is between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party for the length of the Parliament, and as the agreement makes clear, the Secretary of State is not involved in confidence and supply discussions.

Hannah Bardell: Last year, I met two incredibly brave women, Sarah Ewart and Denise Phelan, who have been directly impacted by Northern Ireland’s near total abortion ban and are working with Amnesty UK to change the law. Their harrowing experience of being unable to access safe and legal abortion in Northern Ireland demonstrates the reality of that restrictive regime. In Denise’s case, the foetus died and decomposed inside her. When will the Secretary of State realise that her
Government’s agreement with the DUP is holding back the human rights of women in Northern Ireland, and what is she going to do about it?

John Penrose: I am not quite clear what the very important and, I agree, very difficult issue of abortion laws in Northern Ireland has to do with the confidence and supply agreement. It is not in the confidence and supply agreement at all. It is a very difficult and knotty issue that needs to be addressed as soon as we can get the Stormont Parliament up and running.

Marion Fellows: Can the Minister confirm whether there have been ongoing discussions between any members of the Cabinet and the DUP, seeking support for the Prime Minister's latest attempt to bring back her Brexit deal? If so, will the new DUP bung be subject to the Barnett formula?

John Penrose: I tried to make this clear earlier, but let me repeat it, so that everybody is crystal clear. The confidence and supply agreement is not something that the Northern Ireland Office gets involved in, and rightly so. It is done at a much more senior level between No. 10 and through the usual channels, and it is not something that the Northern Ireland Office would have any particular participation in.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister outline the benefits that confidence and supply one—I use that term in anticipation that we will have another—has brought to the population of Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: There has been a great degree of investment in Northern Ireland as a result of the confidence and supply agreement; the hon. Gentleman is right. There has been extensive spending. We have so far spent £430 million in Northern Ireland on things such as health, education and infrastructure. There is a further £333 million, subject to Parliament’s approval, and the remaining £323 million will be allocated in due course.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) simply was not good enough. The current confidence and supply agreement between the Tories and the DUP has denied Scotland a total of £3.4 billion in Barnett consequentials. Would the Minister care to find out what the next bribe to the DUP will cost the people of Scotland?

John Penrose: It is very clear that the confidence and supply agreement does not incur Barnett consequentials and is separate. In that respect, it is rather like the city deals. I gently point out to Scottish National party members that Scotland has done extremely well out of the city deals—it has had something like £1.25 billion. It is all very well them gesturing that a way, as if it is easy—there are challenges—and I ask that we all help them to take those difficult decisions.

Karen Bradley: The message I took from the local elections is that what people on the doorstep want is restored devolved government as soon as possible and that is what I am working to deliver.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my hope that, having got the local elections under our belts and on the cusp of the European elections—with both of those out of the way—a really firm, positive focus can be placed by all parties on restoring the devolved Assembly in Stormont?

Karen Bradley: I know that the parties in Northern Ireland are determined that they will do all they can to deliver restored devolved government. That is what is best for the people of Northern Ireland and it is what the people of Northern Ireland want. But this will not be easy—there are challenges—and I ask that we all offer our support to the parties in Northern Ireland to help them to take those difficult decisions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): rose—

Mr Speaker: One sentence.

Jim Shannon: Would the Secretary of State like to comment on or make an assessment of the election of Councillor Gary Donnelly—former spokesperson for the 32 County Sovereignty Movement—in the electoral area where the murder of innocent bystander Lyra McKee took place and where police and bystanders were unapologetically and indiscriminately fired towards; and what progress has been made in that murder investigation and the process as well?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a fan of the dash and the semi-colon.

Karen Bradley: Very good in the use of a sentence. I repeat that the lesson I took from the local elections was that people want restored devolved government as soon as possible.

Legacy Consultation

8. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent progress she has made on the consultation on addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past.

[910958]
The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): As the House heard earlier, we had over 17,000 responses to the consultation, many of them containing tales of personal tragedy and loss, so I hope that everyone will understand the need to consider them all respectfully and carefully. The process is almost finished and I hope that we will be able to publish an analysis of the views they contain—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very unfair on the Minister, who is answering a question about the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past. This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and solemnity and I think that the Minister and the questioner should be accorded respect.

John Penrose: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just finishing my remarks by saying that the process of considering those tragic submissions is almost finished and I hope that we will be able to publish an analysis of the views they contain very soon.

Chris Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that we must listen carefully to this consultation and does he agree with the words of the Secretary of State in the foreword to the consultation: “amnesties are not the right approach and” the Government “believes that justice should be pursued”?

John Penrose: Yes, I do. Any solution must allow both unionists and republicans to achieve closure, and for all of Northern Ireland to draw a line and move on. Otherwise it will not last. We have been working closely with the political parties in Northern Ireland, as well as colleagues across both Houses, on the way forward, and, last week, the Secretary of State met the Victims’ Commissioner and legacy groups as well.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Part of the dark past of Northern Ireland is also the question of historical institutional abuse. The Secretary of State has said that she now intends to act. The victims groups this week called on her to stand down and resign. She needs to regain their confidence. She needs to give a very clear timetable as to when she will take action in this House and elsewhere. Will the Minister now make it clear when that will happen?

John Penrose: I thought I heard just now the Secretary of State doing a pretty good job of showing the personal commitment and the urgency with which she is treating this. I am afraid I cannot add any more detail to the timetable, but I hope everybody here will have understood and heard the passion in her voice and the determination to move this forward promptly and swiftly.

Prosecution of Veterans

9. Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If the Government will bring forward legislative proposals to prevent veterans who have previously been investigated and cleared of illegal shooting incidents in Northern Ireland being prosecuted for those incidents. [910599]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): My hon. and gallant Friend gave a very powerful speech on this on Monday, and I would encourage anybody here who has not heard it to go back and listen again. I think he and I agree that the current situation is not working for anyone. The question is not whether things need to change, because they clearly do, but how, so we have laws that work for police veterans as well as armed forces, for unionists and for nationalists, for victims and their families on all sides of the community, and that bring truth and justice and closure so society can move on. We will bring forward proposals as soon as possible.

Bob Stewart: As an ex-soldier, and now a Member of Parliament, I am ashamed that my Government have not sorted this matter out. I ask the Minister, and especially the Secretary of State, who has been in post longer—how much longer before it can be sorted out, and are you not ashamed?

John Penrose: My hon. and gallant Friend, having served in Northern Ireland, speaks with huge authority. The Secretary of State has said that institutional abuse. The Secretary of State has said that Northern Ireland is also the question of historical institutional abuse. The Secretary of State has said that everyone will understand the need to consider them all respectfully and carefully. The process is almost finished and I hope that we will be able to publish an analysis of the views they contain—[Interruption.]

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innocent and defenceless children. Members across the House will want to join me in sending my thoughts and prayers to the families and friends of all the victims. I am sure that Members will also want to join me in paying tribute to the emergency services for the immense bravery and courage they showed that night.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others and, in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

John Woodcock: I know that the whole House will want to associate themselves with the Prime Minister’s words about the Manchester attack.

The Prime Minister may not have long left—good luck with those meetings later today—but she can act now against the return of banned chemical weapons. British experts are this morning investigating a suspected chlorine attack by al-Assad in Idlib. If it is proved, will she lead the international response against the return of this indiscriminate evil?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the evil that is the use of chemical weapons. We of course acted in Syria, with France and the United States, when we saw chemical weapons being used there. We of course suffered the use of chemical weapons here on the streets of the United Kingdom, and we made a robust response, supported by our international friends and allies. We condemn all use of chemical weapons. We are in close contact with the United States and are monitoring the situation closely, and if any use of chemical weapons is confirmed, we will respond appropriately. But our position is clear: we consider Assad incapable of delivering a lasting peace, and his regime lost its legitimacy due to its atrocities against its own Syrian people.

Q2. [911037] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that energy efficiency measures are critical in tackling climate change? Bringing every home up to an energy performance certificate band C standard could save 25% of electricity generation, which is equivalent to six Hinkley Point nuclear power stations; it could save every family £270; and it could potentially pay for itself, by generating £1.27 for every £1 invested.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We, like her, absolutely recognise the importance of this issue. The Government are committed to improving energy efficiency in 2.5 million homes by 2030 and our aim is to bring 2.5 million fuel-poor homes up to an energy performance certificate C rating by 2030. As she says, that will help to save energy and bring down bills.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in commemorating all the victims of the Manchester bombing two years ago. Our thoughts are with the friends and families of all those who were killed, the survivors and the emergency service workers who gave such heroic service that night. They will live with the horrors of that night for the rest of their lives and 10.31 tonight will be a very poignant moment for many people in Manchester.

I want to pay tribute to the last survivor of the Hull “headscarf revolutionaries”, Yvonne Blenkinsop. She is visiting Parliament today. She led a campaign for basic safety in the UK fishing fleet in the 1960s. As a result, many lives were saved. People like her have made such an enormous contribution to our national life. They should be recognised for it.

I also want to express, on behalf of the Labour party, my outrage that the Government have again failed our steel industry, putting 5,000 jobs at risk at British Steel and 20,000 more in the supply chain. The Government have failed those people. Even at this late stage—there is a statement later today—they must step in and save those jobs.

Why are schools having to close early on Friday afternoon due to spending cuts?

The Prime Minister: First, I say to the right hon. Gentleman, because he raised the issue of British Steel, that, obviously, we recognise that this is a worrying time for the thousands of dedicated British Steel workers and their families, as well as those in the supply chain and local communities. The Government have been working tirelessly with the company, its owner Greybull Capital and lenders to explore all potential options to secure a solution for the company. We showed, through the emissions trade scheme agreement, that we were willing to act, but we can only act within the law. It is clear that it would be unlawful to provide a guarantee or loan on the terms requested by the company. We will be working with the company and others, and the official receiver, in the days and weeks ahead to ensure we pursue every step to secure the future of the operations at Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and on Teesside. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has agreed an indemnity for the official receiver to enable British Steel to continue to operate in the immediate future. There are no job losses at this time and the official receiver has already said that staff will continue to be paid and employed. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be updating the House in a statement later this afternoon.

On the issue of schools, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are putting record levels of funding into our schools.

Jeremy Corbyn: That would explain why 26 schools close early on a Friday every week because they do not have enough money to keep themselves open. More than 1,000 schools across England are turning to crowdfunding websites with a wish-list of things they want to raise money to buy—really exotic things such as pencils, glue and textbooks. Why are they forced to do that if they allegedly have enough money in the first place?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman what I have said before and just quoted: we are putting record levels of funding into our schools. We have also put in place a fairer distribution of the funding between our schools. We are giving every area more money for every pupil in every school. What is important in our education system is not just what the Government put in, but what quality of education is received by the children. There are more children in good and outstanding schools; the disadvantage attainment gap has been narrowed; and record rates of disadvantaged young people are going to university. That is a record to be proud of.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not know if the Prime Minister has had a chance to listen to or read the words of the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers. He said:

“The fact so many schools are doing this should be ringing serious alarm bells for the government”...
The Prime Minister does not seem to be aware of the crisis that is facing so many in education at the present time, so can she be very clear with the House: has per pupil funding risen or fallen since 2010?

The Prime Minister: As I said to the right hon. Gentleman, we are giving every area more money for every pupil in every school. Why are we able to do that? It is because the Conservatives have taken a balanced approach to our economy and managed our finances well. What would Labour give us? One thousand billion pounds extra borrowing. That would mean higher taxes, fewer jobs and less money to go into our schools.

Jeremy Corbyn: I can help the Prime Minister out in two ways. One is that a Labour Government would properly fund our schools—We would not short-change our children—and we would not use Orwellian words like “fair funding” while we are cutting. Per pupil funding—just so the Prime Minister understands it—has fallen by 8%. For sixth forms, it is 24%.

At the end of last year, the Prime Minister said “austerity is over.” Maria, who describes herself as a “teacher in an underfunded school” wrote to me this week and asked this—[Interruption.] Maria is a teacher in an underfunded school—I think Conservative Members need to listen to her. She asked: “when will the government stop making false claims of increased funding for schools and start to tackle the serious problems faced by teachers?”

When will the cuts end for our children’s schools?

The Prime Minister: I repeat: we are giving every area more money for every pupil in every school, but let us just see the situation that this Government inherited and that we would see under a Labour Government in the future—having to spend more on debt interest than on our schools budget. That is not because of what this Government are doing, because we are bringing debt down. It is the legacy of a Labour Government—more money on debt than on our schools.

Jeremy Corbyn: What this Government have squandered is what they inherited: children’s centres, Sure Start, children taken out of poverty. They squandered the future for so many of our children. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Burghart, you are an educated young man. When you came into the House, you struck me as a very well behaved fellow. Calm yourself and listen.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Department for Education’s funding chief met school leaders recently and told them: “the first thing to say is obviously they are not generous budgets”—he is very cautious with his words—“They are budgets which leave schools with real pressures to face”.

Everyone agrees that the creative industries in this country are an enormous strength to our economy, so why have the arts borne the brunt of the Government’s brutal cuts to school funding? So many children are losing out on music and creative arts in our schools because of decisions by central Government.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman started his question by claiming that this Government had squandered what had been left by the last Labour Government. Let us look at what was left by the last Labour Government. [Interruption.] Oh. They do not want to be reminded what they left the last time they were in government. What did the last Labour Government leave? Unemployment higher than when they went into office. What did the last Labour Government leave? The biggest deficit in our peacetime history. And what were we told by the departing Chief Secretary to the Treasury? We were told: under Labour, there is no money left.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was actually about funding for arts and creative subjects in schools. A survey has shown that nine out of 10 secondary schools have cut back on lesson time, staff or facilities in at least one of the creative arts subjects. Are the artists and actors of tomorrow only to come from the private schools, while the Prime Minister continues to cut the funding for state schools?

When the Prime Minister says that school funding has been protected, she is denying the daily experience of teachers, parents and pupils. She is denying the incontrovertible evidence of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, education bodies and teaching unions. She is actually in outright denial. When the wealth of the richest 1,000 people has increased by £50 billion in the last year alone, do not tell us that the money is not there for our children’s schools. This Government have cut vital public services to give tax cuts to the privileged few. Can the Prime Minister name a more damaging policy—a more short-sighted policy—than cutting investment in our future: our children?

The Prime Minister: The richest have paid more tax every year under the Conservatives—[Interruption.] Wait for it! They have paid more every year under the Conservatives than in any year under a Labour Government. The right hon. Gentleman talks about what happens in our schools. As I have said, we are putting record funding into our schools, but what matters is the quality of education our children get. Labour opposed the phonics checks; it wants to scrap academies and free schools; and it would abolish SATs. That does not help to raise standards in schools. Let us just look at the Labour record. When it was in government, standards were lower than they are today. Where it is in government in Wales, standards are lower than in England, and if it was to get into government, we would see more of the same—lower standards, less opportunity, less opportunity for young people for a brighter future. It is the Conservative party that gives good-quality education, good jobs and a good future.

Q6. [911041]Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend explain why she ordered that the consultation on the troubles in Northern Ireland not contain proposals for a statute of limitations, as reported in The Sunday Telegraph, and can she update us on what the Government will actually do?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend should not necessarily believe all the reports he reads in the newspapers, but let me be very clear on this particular issue. Around 3,500 people were killed in the troubles. The vast majority
were murdered by terrorists. The legal position is clear. Any amnesty or statute of limitations would have to apply across the board. It would apply to terrorists.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks about the heinous crime that took place two years ago in Manchester. We must all stand together against terrorism.

The Prime Minister: The Prime Minister’s customs tariff plan has been described by the UK’s former representative to the EU as the “definition of insinuation”. Her customs union compromise has already been dismissed by the EU. Is this new deal not just a fantasy?

The Prime Minister: I have set out the 10 points about the new deal. There is an issue about customs. There is a difference of opinion in the House on the future customs arrangement with the EU. That is why it is important that the House comes to a decision on that issue. Allowing the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill will enable the House to come to a decision on that issue. It will also enable the House to come to a decision on a second referendum, which I continue to believe would not be the right route for this country to go down. We should deliver on the first referendum before suggesting anything about a second.

Ian Blackford: My goodness—talk about ignoring reality! Prime Minister, look at the Benches behind you. The Prime Minister is fooling no one but herself. The Prime Minister is fooling no one but herself. The truth is that the people of Scotland do not want her deal, her own party does not want her deal, and now even the pro-Brexit Labour Front Bench will not support her deal. Her time is up. Tomorrow, people in Scotland, even the pro-Brexit Labour Front Bench will not support her deal. Her time is up. Tomorrow, people in Scotland do not want her deal, and now even the pro-Brexit Labour Front Bench will not support her deal. Her time is up.

The Prime Minister: There is only one party in Scotland guaranteeing no more referendums, and that is the Conservative party. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues, calm yourselves. Dignity. Restraint. Let us hear Mr Heappey.

Q9. James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My constituent Jackie Luxon was 26 weeks pregnant at the time of a car crash that caused her baby to be stillborn. However, only the injuries caused to Mrs Luxon and her older daughter were relevant when charging and subsequently sentencing the driver whose dangerous driving caused the crash. The baby, Grace, got no justice at all. I understand from the police and stillbirth support groups that the Luxon’s tragic experience is, sadly, far from unique. Will the Prime Minister look again at the Road Traffic Act 1988 so that those who cause death to viable babies over 24 weeks’ gestation through dangerous driving can be held responsible for these tragic losses of life?

The Prime Minister: I know that all Members across the House—it will have been obvious in response to his question—will want to join me in sending deepest sympathies to my hon. Friend’s constituent. As my hon. Friend will know, the courts can already, and do, consider harm caused to a mother or unborn child in sentencing for an offence. I know my hon. Friend has discussed changing the law on this particular issue with the Ministry of Justice, which is concerned that there could be far-reaching unintended consequences of doing so, but I have asked it to keep the law under review. I know that my hon. Friend, along with others in this House, will continue to work on this issue. I am sure everybody recognises the compassion that my hon. Friend is showing in raising this issue. What we want to ensure is that what he is proposing is not something that could lead to other, unintended consequences, of the sort that he would not wish to see.

Q3. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Prime Minister, it has been brought to my attention that some children suffering from severe epilepsy have been able to greatly reduce, and in some cases end, their seizures if they have access to Bedrolite. Owing to the cumbersome and discriminatory system that this Government implemented on 1 November 2018, parents are required to travel abroad, pay thousands of pounds and break the law to bring medicine back, or to pay extraordinary prices to access Bedrolite privately in the UK. Rather than people having to fight for access on a case-by-case basis, will the Prime Minister apply some common sense, show a soupçon of compassion and do everything she can to make medical cannabis available to the many people who are suffering and to ensure that those who can benefit do?

The Prime Minister: I fully understand that these cases are desperately difficult, and my sympathies are with the families and friends. The Government did change the law, as the hon. Gentleman said, and specialist doctors on the General Medical Council specialist register can now prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use where there is clinical evidence of benefit. NHS England and the chief medical officer have made it clear that cannabis-based products can be prescribed for medicinal use in appropriate cases, but we must trust doctors to make clinical decisions in the best interests of patients.
Q4. [911039] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Brampton Primary School in Chesterfield has an exemplary record in special needs education. Yet, under the Government's funding formula, the school is £6,000 for every special needs child is not actually funded by the Government. When even the Tory lead member for education in Derbyshire describes a school like Brampton as a victim of its own success, is it not time that the Prime Minister, in her final days, changed the funding formula and started looking after those special needs children?

The Prime Minister: We have been putting more money into special educational needs. I recognise that for many parents getting the support that is required for their children can be a difficult process with the local authorities. We recognise the importance of special needs and that is precisely why we have been putting extra support in there.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for the amount of British aid that flows through to the World Food Programme in Yemen and ask if she has noted in the last 48 hours a report by its excellent director David Beasley drawing attention to the diversion and theft of aid in Houthi-controlled areas by Houthi authorities? Will she urge the international community to increase the pressure on Houthi leadership to resolve this and further the efforts for peace in Yemen, rather than take the slightly easy course of always focusing on the Yemeni Government and the Saudi-led coalition?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. As he rightly says, this Government have a good record in terms of the amount of money and the aid we are providing to help those in Yemen, but of course it is only of benefit if it is able to reach those who need it, and it is incumbent on all parties to ensure that that aid reaches those who need it. We will continue to support the efforts to bring a lasting and just peace to Yemen. A political settlement is the way to get that sustainability and security for the future, but it is incumbent on everybody to make sure the aid that is being provided for those who are desperately in need can reach those who need it most.

Q5. [911040] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): On 5 June, the eyes of the world will be on Portsmouth for D-day 75. Events planned will give justice to the sacrifices made by veterans like my own grandfather and will show Portsmouth to be a place that fosters a legacy of remembrance, reflection and reconciliation. Our allies in world war two—Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US—have all taken steps to ensure that coroners record suicide among the veteran community. Prime Minister, why don’t we?

The Prime Minister: May I say first that it is indeed right that the eyes of the world will be on Portsmouth for the D-day national commemorative event? This will be putting our veterans first. It remembers their sacrifices and their achievements, and we will highlight the historic strength of the western alliance and the trans-Atlantic partnership. The hon. Gentleman has raised a specific issue in relation to coroners’ reports and I will write to him in response to that, but may I say that I look forward, as do others, to being in Portsmouth to commemorate this very important anniversary?

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Forty three years ago I, like many others, was ordered to serve in Northern Ireland to keep the peace while terrorists were attacking and killing civilians in Northern Ireland. Many of my colleagues and others did not come back, including one, Robert Nairac, a friend, who was tortured and murdered, and his body has never been found nor his murderers ever brought to justice. In answer to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) my right hon. Friend talked about an amnesty. I must tell her that none of those who served has called for an amnesty; what they have called for is fairness and justice. Many old veterans are now finding, having been cleared decades ago, that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is proceeding against them with no new evidence. Will my right hon. Friend please answer me: how can I say to my old colleagues that this Government have not abandoned them?

The Prime Minister: May I say to my right hon. Friend that we absolutely value the service that he and others gave in Northern Ireland? This was a very difficult time for a part of the United Kingdom and the work that the police and the armed forces did in Northern Ireland during that time was absolutely crucial. We are pleased that we have seen the peace that has come since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, but there was obviously much injury and loss of life during the troubles. As I indicated earlier, around 3,500 people were killed during the troubles; the vast majority of them were murdered by terrorists. My right hon. Friend talked about a fair and just system. We want to ensure that there is a fair and just system that is working across the board to deal with these legacy issues, but at the moment there is a disproportionate emphasis on cases that involve the police and the armed forces. There are cases involving terrorists that are being looked into, but I think people would recognise that there is a disproportionate emphasis on the police and armed forces. It is therefore important that we bring in a system that has full support and will enable people to see that fairness and justice are being applied. That is what the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working on. She has been working on that with the various political parties in Northern Ireland, and it is what we will put forward in due course. We recognise the sacrifice, the bravery and the determination of our armed forces and the work they did in Northern Ireland, and we, too, want to see fairness and justice.

Q7. [911042] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It took time to get there, but the Prime Minister has now recognised that a no-deal Brexit is not a viable option. However, she knows as well as the rest of us that many of her potential successors do not feel the same way. So can she tell us whether she agrees with her Brexit Secretary, among others, who thinks that we should be spending the coming months stepping up the preparations for a no-deal Brexit, or with her Chancellor, who has issued an edict that no more Treasury money should be spent on preparing for a no-deal Brexit?
The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, there is only one way for this House to ensure that we leave the European Union without no deal, and that is to leave with a deal and to support the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill and to take that process through this House. I am sure that she also knows that the legal default position continues to be no deal. Were we to get to 31 October—I want us to leave the EU before then—but were we to get to the 31 October position, it would be a matter for the 27, not just for this country, to determine whether there was no deal or not. This is why it is absolutely right that the Government are continuing to make preparations for no deal.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Like so many people in this Chamber, I want to see more money for schools, hospitals, the police and transport. Is not the best way of doing this to agree a deal that allows us to legally exit the EU, thereby unlocking the three years of pent-up investment that is sitting on the sidelines seeking the certainty that the Prime Minister is trying to deliver and that this party should be trying to deliver?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is pent-up investment there, and there are companies that have been holding investment back until they see the Brexit deal being resolved. It is important that we see that deal going through this House, and supporting the withdrawal agreement Bill is the way to ensure that we deliver the Brexit that the people voted for and that we do it in a way that Conservatives stood on in their manifesto at the last election and actually for and that we do it in a way that Conservatives stood on in their manifesto at the last election and actually

Q8. [911043] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): As a Manchester MP, may I thank the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for their words of remembrance for the victims of the terrorist attack in our city two years ago? In the light of the concerns expressed about delays in accessing compensation and about the amounts being offered to victims following the attack, will the Government give consideration, when the criminal injuries compensation scheme is reviewed this year, to establishing a separate Government funding pot for the victims of terrorist attacks? This would mean that such compensation would not have to be taken from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority funding and that we could give more flexible and immediate support to the victims of terror attacks.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point, and I recognise the force with which he has raised it and the concern that he has for the victims of that terrible attack. Sadly, we have seen too many people in this country being victims of terrorist attacks. The Lord Chancellor has indicated that the Ministry of Justice is reviewing this situation. He has heard the specific proposal the hon. Gentleman has put forward, and I am sure that he will take it into account in that review.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Returning to Northern Ireland, there has now been no devolved government there for two and a half years. Every week in the last election. Once we are over this and once we have left that Labour Members stood on in their manifesto at the last election and actually

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. I am as keen as she is to ensure that we see the restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland. I believe that all the parties have recently come together for talks with the Secretary of State and, as appropriate, the Irish Government, and we are ensuring that those talks are continuing. Obviously, there are matters that need to be addressed and concerns from the political parties on different issues. Those need to be overcome such that we can see devolution restored because, as my hon. Friend says, this is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland, ensuring that they have a devolved Government that can ensure good governance in Northern Ireland.

Q10. [911045] Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): On two previous occasions, I have asked the Prime Minister to do more to support the victims of the leasehold scandal. Now that she is about to move house any time soon, will she give that issue a little more focus and address it urgently to give leaseholders justice?

The Prime Minister: We have been listening to those who have raised concerns about that particular issue. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced that no new Government funding scheme will be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses. We have had a technical consultation on how to improve the market for consumers, and we are analysing the responses. We will shortly respond to the consultation and to the recent Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee report on leasehold reform, and we will introduce legislation in due course.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): In reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the Prime Minister quite rightly paid tribute to the 300,000 security personnel who through their courage, professionalism and skill maintained the rule of law in Northern Ireland, without which the Belfast agreement would never have been signed, but she did not quite answer his question. None of the people who served and defended the rule of law wants a blanket amnesty; they want a categorical assurance that the prosecuting authorities will not bring forward a fresh process within the existing framework of law unless there is clear new evidence and an assurance that, no doubt whatever, a fair trial will proceed.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely appreciate the points that my right hon. Friend and our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) have made in relation to this issue. The problem we face in Northern Ireland is that a number of processes have been aiming to deal with justice in relation to deaths during the troubles, but all the processes that have been followed so far have been found to be flawed in some way. That is why it is necessary to go through
the work that we have been doing to find a process that will not be flawed, that will be legally supportable and that will enable the fairness and justice that we all want to see to be brought to the fore.

Q11. [911046] Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): During the 2017 election campaign, the Prime Minister acknowledged that our social care system is broken and promised to fix it, yet the CEO of a care provider in Crewe and Nantwich recently told me that the decision to cut sleep-in pay for care workers by up to £400 a month is a direct result of underfunding in the care sector. Will the Prime Minister consider legislating to ensure that sleep-in shifts attract at least the national living wage, and will she provide local authorities with the necessary funding to give care workers the pay they deserve?

The Prime Minister: The Government have been dealing with the issue of pay for sleep-in cover. We have had to address the matter as the direct result of a court case. We have been responding to that case, so I recognise the issue about pay for sleep-in cover. We are going to bring forward proposals in relation to the wider issue of social care. We want to ensure that we have a sustainable social care system for the future.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister welcome, with me, the launch of Radio Reminisce, a fantastic, new dementia-friendly, subscription-based radio service? It is designed to help and comfort people over 70 with early-onset dementia, and it was produced and developed in Belper in my constituency.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of support for people with early-onset dementia and for highlighting the new radio service. As she will know, the Government are committed to doubling spending on research into dementia by 2020. The radio service is obviously a practical way of providing support for people with early-onset dementia, and I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the new service. I am sure that it will provide important help to those who are suffering with dementia.

Q12. [911047] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister must be considering her legacy. She said she wants to correct burning injustice, so will she commit to supporting legislation such as that proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) so that abortion in Northern Ireland becomes a health matter, not a criminal one, and, as soon possible, women have equal rights across the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My view on what should happen in relation to abortion is clear, and I have made it clear in the past, but this is a devolved issue and we believe it should be addressed by the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland when that is restored.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): As we look forward to the visit by the President of United States, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is in the national interest that we support his visit and unite across the House, and across the country, to make a success of the visit so that our special relationship endures, grows and supports the success of this country as we exit the EU?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and he is absolutely right. We are looking forward to the state visit of the President of the United States, and we are also looking forward to President Trump joining me and other leaders to commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-day. This is an important commemoration where, as I said in response to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), we will recognise the sacrifice made by British armed forces, American armed forces and others from so many other countries to ensure the freedom of Europe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) is also right that we have a deep and special relationship with the United States of America. It is important, and it is our closest and deepest security and defence relationship. It is a relationship that has helped to keep the peace around the world, and it is one we want to see continue. Every Member of this House should welcome the President of the United States of America to the UK.

Q13. [911048] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We have repeatedly heard from the Prime Minister that it would be an “unforgivable breach of trust in our democracy” if we failed to deliver Brexit, yet if the polls are correct Scotland will send a clear message tomorrow that it wants to remain in Europe by increasing its number of SNP MEPs while wiping out the Tories. Should Scotland increase its number of pro-EU MEPs tomorrow, will the Prime Minister finally listen to the people of Scotland, who want to determine their own future as an independent European nation, or will she breach their trust by leaving Scotland’s people with Boris’s Brexit Britain?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that, if the hon. Gentleman wants to listen to the people of Scotland and their view on their future, he starts listening to the decision they took in 2014 to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): If polling is to be believed, the winning party in tomorrow’s Euro elections will be the Brexit party. This party, by contrast to the Vote Leave campaign in 2016, has clearly stated that a no-deal Brexit is its policy. On the basis of normal turnout, that means between 6 million and 7 million people will have voted for no deal, which begs the question: what of the other 10 million Brexit voters in 2016?

It concerns me, and has long concerned me, that we do not have the consent here in this House to deliver the Brexit that is likely to emanate from this House. With that in mind, and I congratulate the Prime Minister on the first steps towards acknowledging it yesterday, will she commit to reaching out across the House to bring about the vote, which remains to take place, on the choice between having a final say of the British public or a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I do not recognise the choice that my hon. Friend sets out. First, as I said earlier, I have not changed my view on a second referendum. I have been clear that I believe this House should be delivering on the result of the first referendum, and I believe that the choice before this House is whether it wants to deliver on the result of the first referendum and on the manifestos on which the majority of the
Members of this House stood, which were clear that we want to do it with a deal. We can do that, and we can do it by giving a Second Reading to the withdrawal agreement Bill, by seeing the Bill through the House to Royal Assent, by ratifying the treaty and by leaving the European Union.

Q15. [911050] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Universal credit was today condemned again by the United Nations special rapporteur, who likened DWP policy to creating modern versions of “the 19th-century workhouse”. A leaked memo has revealed that the DWP is doubbling down, promoting universal credit with an aggressive public relations campaign, including a BBC documentary and adverts seen in today’s Metro, which DWP officials state “won’t look...like DWP or UC—you won’t see our branding, and this is deliberate.”

Prime Minister, how is it right that the DWP is spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on misleading adverts that promote a cruel policy, which is driving my constituents into debt, despair and destitution?

The Prime Minister: What the DWP is doing is spending not just its resources but its effort—I thank all the staff in the DWP for this—out there, helping people into the workplace and ensuring that when they are in the workplace they are able to keep more of the money they earn.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Two years ago, the Prime Minister visited the fishing village of Mevagissey—I am sure she remembers it, because she bought me some chips for lunch. The people of Mevagissey now face losing their only GP surgery because the remaining doctor has given notice to hand back the contract to the NHS. I am sure the Prime Minister would agree that it is vital that these rural and coastal communities retain their primary care services, so what more can the Government do to attract GPs to rural and coastal communities? Will she use her offices to ensure that everything possible is done to make sure Mevagissey keeps its GP service?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding me of the visit to beautiful Mevagissey and of the good chips that he and I shared on that occasion. Acting under the lawful orders of my officer commanding, I killed a terrorist who was about to murder one of my comrades, yet I am being investigated as if I were a criminal. The IRA have ‘letters of comfort’—we don’t. Why, Prime Minister, are you pandering to Sinn Féin-IRA, while throwing veterans like me to the wolves?” What is your answer, Prime Minister, to this Chelsea pensioner and all the veterans he represents?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has put his case and that of the veteran he is representing, a Chelsea pensioner. We thank that individual, as we thank all those who served in Northern Ireland for their bravery and the determination with which they acted in Northern Ireland. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson)—a former Northern Ireland Secretary—said, that bravery and determination enabled the peace that we see today in Northern Ireland.

It is not the case that the terrorists currently have an amnesty. [Interruption.] No, it has been made very clear that evidence of criminal activity will be investigated and people should be brought to justice. I want to ensure that we have a fair and just system. I do not believe that the system is operating fairly at the moment. I do not want to see a system where there is an amnesty for terrorists. I want to see a system where investigations can take place in a lawful manner, and where the results of those investigations can be upheld and will not be reopened in the future. In order to do that, we need to change the current system, and that is what we will do.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Over the last few days, I have received distressed emails from a number of constituents who are EU citizens living in the UK, but who will not be able to vote tomorrow. Their predicament arises because of this Government’s
late decision to participate in the elections, which did not give many EU citizens enough time to fill out the necessary form declaring that they will not be voting elsewhere. Will the Prime Minister use all the power of her office to take immediate steps this afternoon to ensure that the necessary form is made available at polling stations tomorrow so that EU citizens living in the United Kingdom will not be disenfranchised?

The Prime Minister: We take every step to ensure that those who are entitled to vote in elections are indeed able to do so. The hon. and learned Lady says that it was a late decision by the Government to enter into the European elections. Of course, that decision was taken because of a decision by this House on 29 March not to agree a deal that would have made it unnecessary to hold European elections.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I think the Prime Minister is beginning to understand the level of fury of veterans when it comes to their treatment by this place over this year. The most disturbing part of last weekend was the insinuation of equivalence between those who got up in the morning to go and murder women, children and civilians and those who donned a uniform to go and protect the Crown. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to tell the nation that she sees no equivalence whatever between those two groups and that the line that preferential treatment should not be given to veterans is not right?

The Prime Minister: I would hope that it is absolutely clear from everything that I have said at this Dispatch Box that I value the sacrifice, bravery and commitment of our armed forces, whose work in Northern Ireland—alongside the police in Northern Ireland and others—enabled us to get to the stage at which we are at today, whereby we have the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and have had peace in Northern Ireland for many years now, and long may that continue. There is no question of equating that bravery and sacrifice with the acts of terrorists. I think the implication of my hon. Friend’s question is that he is urging me to put in place a system that would equate terrorists with members of the armed forces. Any statute of limitations and any amnesty that is put in place would, as a matter of law, have to apply across the board. I do not want to see—and I will not see—an amnesty for the terrorists.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for recognising the impact on steelworkers and their families of the devastating news that British Steel has gone into liquidation and for recognising the high quality of work that they do on Teesside, at Skinningrove and in my constituency of Scunthorpe. Will she meet cross-party MPs whose constituencies are affected by this news, so that we can look together at how best to ensure that this great industry moves forward to serve this country into the future?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I recognise that this is a worrying time for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and others. The Government have been actively looking at what we can do. We have given support through the ETS agreement, but have not lawfully been able to give the further support that was requested. I will certainly meet the hon. Gentleman and a group of MPs to consider the issue. This is about one company, owned by Greybull Capital. However, we have taken steps in the past to ensure that the United Kingdom continues to have a steel industry, and we will want to look at the wider issue.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we come to the Prime Minister’s statement, I think it is fitting for me to refer again to something that was mentioned at the start of questions to the Prime Minister by the Leader of the Opposition.

Three trawlers set out from Hull during January and February of 1968 and never returned, leading to the loss of 58 lives. Yvonne Marie Blenkinsop is the last surviving member of a group of women from Hull who became known, following that tragedy, as the headscarf revolutionaries. The women campaigned for better protection for their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Through their actions, countless lives have been saved. I am reliably informed that Yvonne Marie Blenkinsop is with us today, observing our proceedings. We salute her and her fellow women, and we extend to her the warmest welcome to the House of Commons. [Applause.]
Leaving the European Union

12.57 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I make my statement, may I, too, recognise the work of Yvonne Marie Blenkinsop and others, and indeed all those who have campaigned over the years to ensure that those in the workplace can have the degree of safety and security that they need?

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s work to deliver Brexit by putting forward a new deal that Members of this House can stand behind.

We need to see Brexit through, to honour the result of the referendum and to deliver the change the British people so clearly demanded. I sincerely believe that most Members of this House feel the same—that, for all our division and disagreement, we believe in democracy, and that we want to make good on the promise we made to the British people when we asked them to decide on the future of our EU membership. As to how we make that happen, recent votes have shown that there is no majority in this House for leaving with no deal, and this House has voted against revoking article 50. It is clear that the only way forward is leaving with a deal, but it is equally clear that this will not happen without compromise on all sides of the debate. That starts with the Government, which is why we have just held six weeks of detailed talks with the Opposition—talks that the Leader of the Opposition chose to end before a formal agreement was reached, but that none the less revealed areas of common ground.

Having listened to the Opposition, to other party leaders, to the devolved Administrations and to business leaders, trade unionists and others, we are now making a 10-point offer to Members across the House—10 changes that address the concerns raised by right hon. and hon. Members; 10 binding commitments that will be enshrined in legislation so they cannot simply be ignored; and 10 steps that will bring us closer to the bright future that awaits our country once we end the political impasse and get Brexit done.

First, we will protect British jobs by seeking as close to frictionless trade in goods with the EU as possible while outside the single market and ending free movement. The Government will be placed under a legal duty to negotiate our future relationship on this basis.

Secondly, we will provide much-needed certainty for our vital manufacturing and agricultural sectors by keeping up to date with EU rules for goods and agri-food products that are relevant to checks at the border. Such a commitment, which will also be enshrined in legislation, will help protect thousands of skilled jobs that depend on just-in-time supply chains.

Thirdly, we will empower Parliament to break the deadlock over future customs arrangements. Both the Government and the Opposition agree that we must have as close to frictionless trade at the UK-EU border as possible, protecting the jobs and livelihoods that are sustained by our existing trade with the EU, but while we agree on the ends, we disagree on the means. The Government have already put forward a proposal that delivers the benefits of a customs union but with the ability for the UK to determine its own trade and development policy. The Opposition are sceptical of our ability to negotiate that and do not believe that an independent trade policy is in the national interest. They would prefer a comprehensive customs union with a UK say in EU trade policy, but with the EU negotiating on our behalf.

As part of the cross-party discussions, the Government offered a compromise option of a temporary customs union on goods only, including a UK say in relevant EU trade policy, so that the next Government can decide their preferred direction. We were not able to reach agreement, so instead we will commit in law to let Parliament decide this issue and to reflect the outcome of this process in legislation.

Fourthly, to address concerns that a future Government could roll back hard-won protections for employees, we will publish a new workers’ rights Bill. As I have told the House many times, successive British Administrations of all colours have granted rights and protections to British workers well above the standards demanded by Brussels. I know that people want guarantees, and I am happy to provide them. If passed by Parliament, this Bill will guarantee that the rights enjoyed by British workers can be no less favourable than those of their counterparts in the EU—both now and in the future—and we will discuss further amendments with trade unions and business.

Fifthly, the new Brexit deal will also guarantee that there will be no change in the level of environmental protection when we leave the EU. We will establish a new and wholly independent office of environmental protection, able to uphold standards and enforce compliance.

Sixthly, the withdrawal agreement Bill will place a legal duty on the Government to seek changes to the political declaration that will be needed to reflect this new deal, and I am confident that we will be successful in doing so.

Seventhly, the Government will include in the withdrawal agreement Bill at its introduction a requirement to vote on whether to hold a second referendum. I have made my own view clear on this many times—I am against a second referendum. We should be implementing the result of the first referendum, not asking the British people to vote in a second one. What would it say about our democracy if the biggest vote in our history were to be rerun because this House did not like the outcome? What would it do to that democracy and what forces would it unleash? However, I recognise the genuine and sincere strength of feeling across the House on this important issue. To those MPs who want a second referendum to confirm the deal, I say that you need a deal and therefore a withdrawal agreement Bill to make it happen. Let it have its Second Reading and then those MPs can make their case to Parliament. If this House votes for a referendum, it would require the Government to make provisions for such a referendum, including legislation if it wanted to ratify the withdrawal agreement.

Eighthly, Parliament will be guaranteed a much greater role in the second part of the Brexit process: the negotiations over our future relationship with the EU. In line with the proposal put forward by the hon. Members for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), the new Brexit deal will set out in law that the House of Commons will approve the UK’s objectives for the negotiations. MPs will also be asked to approve the treaty governing that relationship before the Government sign it.
Ninthly, the new Brexit deal will legally oblige the Government to seek to conclude the alternative arrangements process by December 2020, avoiding any need for the Northern Ireland backstop coming into force. This commitment is made in the spirit of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), passed by this House on 29 January. Although it is not possible to use alternative arrangements to replace the backstop in the withdrawal agreement, we will ensure that they are a viable alternative.

Finally, tenthly, we will ensure that, should the backstop come into force, Great Britain will stay aligned with Northern Ireland. We will prohibit the proposal that a future Government could split Northern Ireland off from the UK’s customs territory, and we will deliver on our commitments to Northern Ireland in the December 2017 joint report in full. We will implement paragraph 50 of the joint report in law. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive will have to give their consent on a cross-community basis for new regulations that are added to the backstop. We will work with our confidence and supply partners on how these commitments should be entrenched in law, so that Northern Ireland cannot be separated from the United Kingdom.

Following the end of EU election purdah, the withdrawal agreement Bill will be published on Friday so that the House has the maximum possible time to study its detail. If Parliament passes the Bill before the summer recess, the UK will leave the EU by the end of July. We will be out of the EU political structures and out of ever closer union. We will stop British laws being enforced by a European court. We will end free movement. We will stop British laws being enforced by a European court. We will end free movement. We will end freedom of movement. We will stop British laws being enforced by a European court.

But while those talks were going on, Cabinet Minister after Cabinet Minister made statements undermining what their colleagues in the room were offering. The Foreign Secretary, the Leader of the House, the International Trade Secretary and the Treasury Chief Secretary all made it clear that they would not tolerate a deal that included a customs union, while Tory leadership contender after Tory leadership contender took it in turns to make it absolutely clear that any compromise deal they would survive the upcoming Tory leadership contest. But while those talks were going on, Cabinet Minister after Cabinet Minister made statements undermining what their colleagues in the room were offering. The Foreign Secretary, the Leader of the House, the International Trade Secretary and the Treasury Chief Secretary all made it clear that they would not tolerate a deal that included a customs union, while Tory leadership contender after Tory leadership contender took it in turns to make it absolutely clear that any compromise deal would not be honoured. Therefore, no matter what the Prime Minister offers, it is clear that no compromise would survive the upcoming Tory leadership contest.

The multiple leaks reported from the Cabinet yesterday show that the Prime Minister could not even get the compromise deal she wanted through her own Cabinet, and it is clear that the shrunken offer that emerged satisfied no one—not her own Back Benchers, not the Democratic Unionist party and not the Official Opposition either. No Labour MP can vote for a deal on the compromise of a Prime Minister who only has days left in her job. Even if the Prime Minister could honour her promises, the deal she is putting before us does not represent a genuine compromise. Her 10-point plan is riddled with contradiction and wishful thinking. First, the Prime Minister pretends she is delivering something new with a temporary customs union. This is not a compromise—it is just accepting the reality. Under the withdrawal
agreement, we will already be in a temporary customs union through the transition period, which can last up to four years, and if not, we will enter the backstop, which, in effect, keeps us in a customs union, too, without any say.

Secondly, why would this House legislate for a plan that has already been comprehensively rejected by the European Union? The Government want to align with the European Union on goods to keep frictionless trade, but they also want to pursue trade deals that would undermine this process. It is simply not compatible. The technology they need to continue to pursue their Chequers plan simply does not exist. It has already been ruled out by the EU as illegal, impractical and an invitation to fraud. The Government have failed to provide any economic analysis to show that this would make us better off. Why would the House support such a chaotic and desperate approach?

Labour set out a sensible compromise plan over a year ago, including a comprehensive and permanent customs union with the EU that gives us a say, which would allow us to strike trade deals as part of the world’s biggest trading bloc, bringing investment, while maintaining the highest standards. It is credible and achievable, and the best way to protect industry, manufacturing and jobs—something that this Government are woefully indifferent to, as the latest crisis in the steel industry shows today. The Government must be prepared to step in and take a public stake to save thousands of high-skilled jobs at British Steel—a foundation industry for any major economy. Instead, the Tory obsession is for striking trade deals with the likes of Donald Trump. They prioritise chlorinated chicken, further NHS privatisation and deregulation over protecting supply chains and jobs in this country.

On workers’ rights, we have yet to see the full package the Government intend to bring forward, but many people in the trade union movement remain very sceptical. As Frances O’Grady of the Trades Union Congress said yesterday,

“This reheated Brexit deal won’t protect people’s jobs and rights.”

On environmental protections, it is clear that the Prime Minister is not offering dynamic alignment and that under her proposals the UK would fall behind in a number of areas, with only a toothless regulator under the control of the Environment Secretary in place of binding international commitments to protect our environment.

Finally, on a confirmatory vote, I am sure that nobody here will be fooled by what the Prime Minister is offering. Will she tell us now, if this offer is genuine, will she give her party a free vote on this issue or will she, as before, whip against a confirmatory referendum? If the Government truly believe this is the best deal for the economy and for jobs, they should not fear putting that to the people.

For too long, our politics has been seen through a prism of leave or remain. This is dividing our society and poisoning our democracy. It means that vital issues are being neglected—the crisis in our schools and hospitals, the housing crisis and the cruelty of social security policy and universal credit. Our country needs leadership to bring us together. However, this Prime Minister is not the person to do that. Throughout the last three years, she has made no attempt to unite the country. She has been focused only on keeping her divided party together—and it has not worked. Her time has run out. She no longer has the authority to offer a compromise and cannot deliver. That is why it is time for a general election to break the Brexit deadlock and give the country a say.

**The Prime Minister:** I think that the right hon. Gentleman gave the game away when he made it absolutely clear that, as far as he is concerned, the way to get this through the House is for everybody else to compromise to his plan and only his plan. He was very clear that he was not making any proposals to compromise. The Government have indeed compromised. We have recognised that there are issues on which this House will need to decide—and that is the plain fact.

There are different opinions across this House on the two key issues of the future customs arrangement and the second referendum. I have made my position very clear on these. The Government have set out their position. But it is for this House to decide, and the best vehicle to do this is within the withdrawal agreement Bill, so then this House can finally make its mind up on what it wants the future customs arrangement to be and whether it thinks there should be a second referendum.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about free votes on a second referendum. Well, of course, in the indicative vote process that went through, we did indeed give Conservative Members a free vote on this issue, and the second referendum was rejected across the House.

The right hon. Gentleman made some inaccurate comments. He talks about the environmental regulator. It will be an independent body that is able to hold the Government to account on environmental standards. I think that he shows his blinkered view on trade when what he sets out is that, as far as he seems to be concerned, the only people he wants to trade with are in the European Union. Actually, what we want to see is a good trade deal with the EU and good trade deals with other countries around the world—that is the best way forward for the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about British Steel. I answered questions in Prime Minister’s questions on British Steel and what the Government are doing. He talked about Labour’s position of wanting a comprehensive customs union, all the dynamic alignment and single market alignment. What the Labour party wants to achieve in its relationship with the EU would make it even harder for a British Government to take action to protect industries such as the steel industry. He has always complained about state aid rules, but he wants to tie us into those state aid rules with what he proposes.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about different opinions across the House. Of course, the one issue that has never properly been resolved in this House and that the withdrawal agreement Bill would force to be resolved is whether he himself is for Brexit or against it. If he is for Brexit, he will vote for the withdrawal agreement Bill. Voting against the withdrawal agreement Bill is voting against Brexit.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Environment Secretary was on the radio this morning, and when asked whether it was
certain that the Bill would be brought to Parliament for Second Reading, he did not answer in the affirmative. He said that the Government would “reflect” and listen. Having presented this statement at the Dispatch Box, is the Prime Minister absolutely certain that she will bring the Bill to the House for Second Reading? If so, could she name the date now and then say she will stick to it?

The Prime Minister: We have already made the Government’s position clear: the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill will be brought to the House after the Whitsun recess.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is customary to thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. It was some surprise that we all saw the statement being delivered not in the House of Commons but elsewhere yesterday. Why was the usual protocol of Parliament being the first to hear such statements from the Prime Minister not followed?

Let me give the Prime Minister some friendly advice: this deal is dead. Stop the charade, and let us get on with putting the decision back to the people once and for all. The headlines this morning cry of doom. Conservative Members are concentrating on ways to mount a leadership coup. Where are they? That is exactly what they are doing this afternoon—they are not here to support the Prime Minister.

This is no way to run a Government. The Prime Minister is asking MPs to vote for a deal that takes Scotland out of the single market and eventually out of the customs union. That simply cannot be allowed to happen. This is a rookie Government attempting to blackmail MPs. If we look behind the smoke and mirrors, we see a new, revised deal that has not even been negotiated with Brussels: a second EU referendum, but only if we vote for the Bill; a possible temporary customs union that a future UK Government could change and the European Union has dismissed; and a trade tariff arrangement that the former UK representative to the EU has described as “the definition of insanity”.

None of what the Prime Minister announced yesterday was discussed with the devolved Government in Edinburgh. This goes to the heart of the problem. In December 2016, the Scottish Government published a compromise position, which was rejected without discussion. Scotland’s voice has been ignored time and again. Brexit has meant powers being stripped away from the Scottish Parliament. There is no respect for the devolved Administrations by this Government. Westminster has ignored Scotland.

This is a sorry mess. Look around—there is no support for the Prime Minister’s deal. This deal faces an even bigger defeat than the last vote. Tomorrow, communities will make their voices heard in our democratic European elections. A vote for the Scottish National party is a vote to stop Brexit, a vote to stop this economic madness and a vote to respect Scotland’s decision in 2016. The Prime Minister has lost the confidence of her party. Parliament will not support her, and she has lost the trust of the people. It is time to go, Prime Minister. Will you do it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about discussions with the Scottish Government. Of course there have been discussions with the Scottish Government. I have met the First Minister, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has held a number of meetings with the Scottish Government. The devolved Administrations have been party to the debates and discussions that have been taking place.

The right hon. Gentleman says that a vote for the Scottish nationalists is a vote not to leave the European Union. A vote for the Scottish nationalists is a vote to betray our democracy and to betray the view of the people of the United Kingdom. People asked us in this House to deliver Brexit. We have a responsibility to do that. The question is how we do that. The withdrawal agreement Bill gives us the opportunity to debate the issues about how we do that. This House should have those debates, come to a decision, stop ducking the issues and get on with the job that the British people instructed us to do.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What does the Prime Minister say to the many members of the public who think the Government should have kept their promise to take us out on 29 March with or without the draft treaty? What does she say to the millions of angry leave voters who do not see the agreement as any kind of Brexit, but a lock-in for many months with no clear way out?

The Prime Minister: With the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend, what I say to voters who expected us to leave on 29 March is that the Government’s position was that we should leave on 29 March. The majority of Government Members voted for us to leave on 29 March. Sadly, Opposition Members and some others voted to keep us in on that date.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given that this Bill appears to have been sunk even before its publication, the Prime Minister must know that the only way now to break the deadlock—which, as today’s terrible news about British Steel shows, is damaging our economy—is to put the choice back to the British people. At this eleventh hour, may I urge her to take that one final step, change her mind and say that she will support a confirmatory referendum?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated in a number of answers to questions this afternoon, I have not changed my view on a second referendum. I believe that we should be putting into effect the views of the people expressed in the first referendum, but I recognise the strength of feeling in the House on this issue from the right hon. Gentleman and others, particularly on the Opposition Benches. That is why it is important that we in this House are able to determine this issue, which is best done through the passage of the withdrawal agreement Bill. That is why I have confirmed yesterday and today that there will be a vote during the passage of the withdrawal agreement Bill on whether to hold a second referendum. The Government’s position will be clear: we do not think it right to hold a second referendum. But it will be for Members of this House to come together and determine that, for those who believe there should be a second referendum to put their case to the House and for the House to come to a decision.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Prime Minister tells us that, if MPs vote for the withdrawal agreement Bill—which we have not even seen, let alone the
amendments that will be tabled to it—we would leave the European Union by 31 July. How on earth does she know that?

**The Prime Minister:** Because I have been discussing, and business managers have been discussing, a timetable for the Bill’s passage. Obviously, a business motion and a programme motion have to be agreed by the House. It is very clear, and the determination of the last European Council makes it clear, that bringing the Bill back for Second Reading after the Whitsun recess would enable us to do exactly what I said and leave the European Union on 31 July.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Given the awful news about British Steel, it is crucial that the Government stand up for British manufacturing. The Prime Minister will know that a customs union is immensely important to manufacturing across the north and the midlands and that industry needs a long-term deal to support investment. Given the reports coming out of Cabinet yesterday, can she tell us: has the Cabinet ruled out a long-term customs union being part of the future partnership with the EU that they are supposedly going to negotiate after this withdrawal agreement? Have they ruled out a long-term customs union—yes or no?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady referenced what has happened to Greybull Capital’s company, British Steel. She will be aware, as others will, that a number of issues and a number of challenges face the steel industry—not just in the UK, but globally—and part of that, of course, is the overcapacity issue because supply is outstripping demand. Of course, much of the excess production is coming from China. That is why in the G20 two or three years ago we acted to bring China around the table to try to deal with that issue.

The right hon. Lady asks about the long term. The compromise solution on customs that I put forward and referenced in my statement is designed to ensure that a future Government can take that issue in the direction that they wish to take it, and for the House to determine what those negotiating objectives should be. What matters to our manufacturing industry is the frictions that take place at the border and having the benefits of the customs union in no tariffs and no quotas. That is exactly what is already in the political declaration—the benefits of the customs union—and, as I say, we are committed to ensuring that trade is as frictionless as possible.

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): It is difficult to make any judgments about a Bill when it has not been published. If there were issues with purdah, the announcement should not have been made this week. Next week, this House is in a recess, which is very nice for all of us, but it is not needed, given the seriousness of the situation. I will probably vote for the Bill when it comes back, but please can I ask the Prime Minister to reflect very carefully on whether it should be put to Parliament, because the consequences of its not being passed are very serious? If she really wants to heal the divisions and to get on with it, I ask her to reflect very seriously about this Bill not being put to Parliament in early June and being allowed more compromise and more time being taken.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is right that, if the Bill is not passed, this House will be faced with a stark choice. That choice will be whether Members go for no deal, for revoking article 50 or for a second referendum, with the intention that many have, in asking for a second referendum, to stop Brexit. That will be the choice that will face this House.

People talk about the compromises that have been made so far. There are people who are telling me that I have compromised too much in the package that has been put forward and others who are telling me I have not compromised enough in the package. At some stage, the House has to come together, and we have to decide the distance that we will go together to deliver Brexit and to deliver on what people asked us to do.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister has referred a lot in this statement and yesterday to the new deal—the new Brexit deal—but is it not a fact that the deal itself has not changed? The treaty is as it is, and these are a series of domestic legislative provisions to try to mitigate what is, in some cases, a very bad deal, but they will not actually change the Brexit deal itself. To illustrate that, the alternative arrangements proposal that she has put forward seeks merely to legally oblige the Government to conclude their own processes, but will she confirm that there is absolutely no obligation on the European Union to agree alternative arrangements? Indeed, the final decision about whether it accepts them or views them as reasonable is entirely a matter for the EU. It will not even be a matter of objective assessment. If a member state Government decide that they would rather keep us in the customs union, that is what will happen. There will be no means of getting out of it.

**The Prime Minister:** We have put forward to the House today a package of proposals. It is a new package of proposals. The right hon. Gentleman has been clear that, in relation to the operation of the backstop, one of his key concerns was making that UK-wide. That commitment is there in the statement that I have made today. As I have said, we are happy to sit down and discuss how we can ensure that these are enshrined in law, which I know has always been an issue of concern to him.

As regards the alternative arrangements, the groups to do that work have been set up by the Government and the money has been afforded by the Government to do that work. But the European Union was clear—and it has committed itself in the legally binding commitments that have been made at recent Council meetings—that it will also work with us to ensure that those alternative arrangements are in place and are available by the end of December 2020.

**Mr Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire) (Con): Has the European Union agreed to any changes to the withdrawal agreement that are legally binding in international law?

**The Prime Minister:** I have said to my right hon. Friend and others on many occasions, and the EU Council has made it clear on many occasions, that the EU is not reopening the withdrawal agreement. What we have done in the processes that we have taken through the House up until now—until the most recent discussions with the European Union—is to be able to have certain
legally binding commitments made by both the UK and the European Union in addition to the text of the withdrawal agreement, which cover a number of issues that have been of concern to people in this House.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister understand that she will not get enough support from Opposition Members to allow her withdrawal agreement to pass unless she includes a confirmatory vote in the Bill? She has come to the end of the road. But if she and indeed any Conservative MP wants to stop the Prime Minister’s successor from inevitably pursuing a no-deal Brexit, they must back giving the public the final say. Time is running out. Prime Minister, please change your mind.

The Prime Minister: This is an issue on which, as I say, there are very strong feelings across this House. I have met Members from all sides of the House who support a second referendum and who have put forward their case with their sincere belief in that second referendum. I have a different view. I believe we should be delivering on the first referendum, but I believe—because of the strength of view across this House, on both sides of the argument—that it is important that the House has the opportunity properly to consider it in a way that is appropriate, and that is through the withdrawal agreement Bill.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): One of the ironies of resigning from the Government is that it gives you rather more freedom and emphasis when you choose to support the Government, and I will be supporting the Prime Minister’s Bill. I thank her for her efforts and ask her to recognise that there are still many people in the country who believe that the best future for the UK outside the EU is with a compromise deal based on the interests of both, rather than a reckless and increasingly bitter pursuit of a single type of no-deal leaving—at a cost to many businesses, industry and agriculture and a cost to the country—so expertly skewed by the Chancellor in his speech yesterday?

The Prime Minister: I do indeed agree with my right hon. Friend that I think there are many people across this country who want to see us leaving the EU in an orderly way and with a deal. Indeed, that was the manifesto on which he and I, and those of us who sit here as Conservatives, stood at the last election. We stood to deliver the best possible deal for Britain as we leave the European Union, delivered by a smooth, orderly Brexit, with a new, deep and special partnership, including a comprehensive free trade and customs agreement with the European Union. Those are the objectives that I have been pursuing. I have put forward today a new package that does change the situation that has been voted on previously. I hope all those who want to leave the European Union with a deal will indeed support it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In 1992, the Prime Minister and I toured the working men’s clubs of north-west Durham and I was hugely impressed with her resilience in front of audiences that were as hostile to her as they were indifferent to me. [HON. MEMBERS: “What’s changed?”] Indeed. But it turns out that the audience behind her is tougher still. She will fail in her bid in two weeks’ time because people behind her who are for Brexit refuse to vote for Brexit. That is not her fault, but it is her problem. For old times’ sake, I want to help her out. If she will agree to put her deal—to be fair to her, it is the only concrete version of Brexit we have yet seen—to the British people in a confirmatory vote, I will join her in the Lobby. Will she help me to help her?

The Prime Minister: May I say to the hon. Gentleman that I fondly remember those days in 1992 in north-west Durham? I also say to him that I think, if this House does not pass the withdrawal agreement Bill and if the House does not enable the treaty to be ratified, what this House is saying is that it does not want to leave the European Union with a deal. I believe that the majority of people in this House do want to leave with a deal. This is the vehicle to do it.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I correct my right hon. Friend on two points that she has made today? First, she said that it was up to the House to decide about a customs union and a second referendum. It is not up to MPs to decide that; the country decided to leave—spelled L.E.A.V.E.—the EU. It is not for the House. Secondly, when she responded to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), she said that we could not have left the EU on 29 March. The legal position was that we could have done so, but she and—dare I say it?—very heavily remain Cabinet decided not to take us out.

The Prime Minister: I and my colleagues across Government voted to leave the European Union on 29 March. We continue to believe that the best way to leave the European Union is with a deal. That is the manifesto on which my hon. Friend and I both stood at the last general election, and I believe it is important that we recognise that and deliver it for the British people. He makes the point about whether it is for the House to decide. The British people voted to leave. I have been trying to leave the European Union. I am looking forward to voting a fourth time to leave the European Union in the withdrawal agreement Bill. Sadly, Opposition Members and some of my colleagues have not voted alongside me. How we do it is a matter for this House, because the deal must be ratified by this House, and the Government and this House must determine the objectives for the next stage of negotiations. I have been clear that those negotiations will be taken forward by somebody else leading this Government, but I am also clear that we cannot get on to that second stage of negotiations until we get over the first stage. That is what the Bill is about.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Prime Minister rightly referred in her statement to the need to avoid the risks inherent in the Brexit process. Does she not realise that her latest proposals hard-wire those risks into the process?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the issues on which there is significant division in this House—namely, customs and a second referendum—and taking those through in the withdrawal agreement Bill, the Government are committing to ensuring that those issues can be addressed during the passage of the Bill. The reality of the way legislation works is that
people would table amendments to any Bill brought before the House, and amendments could be seen on a whole range of issues, including those. The key question is what this House determines in response to those issues. This House will have to come to a decision.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): On the basis of the negotiations thus far, what arrangements alternative to the Irish backstop does my right hon. Friend consider to be most capable of securing agreement?

The Prime Minister: A set of proposals have been put before the European Union, with a number of elements in them that bring together both technological approaches, some of which can be improved as we see technology developing, and the key issues that have been debated and discussed so far—those around elements of the derogation from EU law that will be necessary in order to enable the alternative arrangements to provide for no hard border in the way that both sides intend them to.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): With respect, the Prime Minister is asking us to put our faith in her deal while, frankly, authority is slipping from her grasp with every passing hour. The Tories have had three years to agree a deal among themselves, including weeks of full-on collaboration with Labour, yet there is no guarantee that she will be in a place to bring the Bill back next month. How can we believe that there is any guarantee of a people’s vote, when she cannot even bring herself to put it in the Bill?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady and I have different views on the issue of a second referendum, but I am saying that the Prime Minister is asking us to put our faith in her deal while, frankly, authority is slipping from her grasp with every passing hour. The Tories have had three years to agree a deal among themselves, including weeks of full-on collaboration with Labour, yet there is no guarantee that she will be in a place to bring the Bill back next month. How can we believe that there is any guarantee of a people’s vote, when she cannot even bring herself to put it in the Bill?

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We cannot continue to leave our country in this uncertainty. This has to stop. The whole House needs to stop saying no to everything on the table, just because it is not our favourite dish. The EU negotiators also need to stop saying no every time we have an issue, but we have to end this uncertainty. If we vote for the Bill, we can move on and the discussions on the next stage can start. I ask the Prime Minister: what happens if we say no again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we need to be able to move on. We can move on, while respecting the wish of the British people, by taking the Bill through and ensuring that we ratify and that we respect the wish of the British people, by taking the Bill forward, it will face a choice of no deal or to leave without a deal. Regarding that timetable, if a change in Prime Minister occurs near the end of October, leaving her successor no time to negotiate a further extension, will she request a further extension herself before the September recess, to stop us leaving with no deal?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman knows my answer to that: if he really wants to ensure that we do not leave the European Union without a deal, the best way is to agree a deal, and that is the Bill.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is the saddest irony that those of my colleagues who most want to leave the European Union have so far frustrated us from doing so by voting with Labour and the Scottish nationalists. The Prime Minister is right to highlight the dangers of Parliament not supporting the withdrawal agreement Bill the day before the European elections, which none of us on this side wanted to happen. Does she agree that the superficially seductive line from the Brexit party, “Just leave on WTO terms,” holds enormous dangers, above all for our farmers and manufacturers, and would in fact cause the break-up of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, particularly in the point he makes about the dangers of a no-deal Brexit for the future of the United Kingdom. That is a key concern of mine in relation to that issue. It is also surprising to see that some of those who, at the time of the referendum, while encouraging people to leave, were talking about leaving with a deal, being like Norway and accepting those sorts of restraints on the United Kingdom’s ability, are now unwilling to accept a deal that would enable us to leave and would be good for the future of the UK. When people come to vote at the European elections tomorrow, they have an opportunity to vote for a party that not only believes in delivering Brexit but can do it, and that is the Conservatives.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister has said that this 10-point offer was framed after having listened to the devolved Administrations, yet there is nothing in it to address the concerns expressed by Scotland’s Government, the cross-party majority in Scotland’s Parliament and the majority of Scottish Members elected to this House. Now that her days of sneering at the democratically elected representatives of voters in Scotland are nearly at an end, does she concede that her successor will need a more intelligent approach to Scotland than she has felt able to adopt?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently engaged with the Scottish Government, and with the Welsh Government, throughout our discussions and negotiations on our future in the European Union. What is important is that we all recognise the responsibility we have to deliver on the vote that took place in 2016—

Joanna Cherry: I don’t have that responsibility.

The Prime Minister: The hon. and learned Lady says she does not have that responsibility. She is an elected Member of this House and she has a responsibility in the votes that she casts. She has said consistently that she does not want us to leave without a deal. That can out a timetable for her departure. She has also just said that there is no mandate here, or indeed in the country, to leave without a deal. Regarding that timetable, if a change in Prime Minister occurs near the end of October, leaving her successor no time to negotiate a further extension, will she request a further extension herself before the September recess, to stop us leaving with no deal?
only happen if we have a deal, or, of course, if we choose to stay in the European Union. She says that we have not listened to the Scottish Government. What the Scottish nationalists have made clear at every stage is that they wish to revoke article 50, they wish to go back on the referendum result of 2016, and they wish to keep the United Kingdom in the EU. The majority of the British public do not want that; they want the party in government and parliamentarians in this House to deliver on what they asked us to do.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Prime Minister rightly referred in her statement—[Interruption.]—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a most extraordinary situation. The hon. Gentleman is seeking to ask a question in a seomly way and is effectively being heckled and prevented from doing so by the clashing from a sedentary position in pursuit of Scottish tribal warfare by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). Calm yourself, man. The Prime Minister is perfectly capable of looking after herself. She was asked a question and she has given an answer. There can be differences of opinion and interpretation as to what is the responsibility of a Member of Parliament, and those issues have been aired. The hon. Gentleman has not in any way benefited the mix by his disorderly chunter.

Robert Neill: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister rightly referred in her statement to the importance of leaving in a way that maintains the closest possible security, policing and judicial co-operation with the EU27. That is what we have at the moment. The Justice Committee was given clear evidence by the head of the National Crime Agency that to do otherwise would severely impair our ability to fight organised crime and terrorism and keep our country safe. Does she agree that to fail to leave without a deal—to fail, therefore, to pass the only available means of leaving with a deal—will be to put the security of the country at risk? That is not something that any Member of this House could responsibly contemplate doing.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of security. It is one that is rarely raised in these debates. The majority of questions tend to be about the economic and trade relationship, but the security relationship is fundamental to us being able to keep ourselves safe. That is why I am pleased we have negotiated, in the political declaration, the strongest possible security relationship with the EU for the future of any country that would be outside the European Union. Of course, if we were to leave with no deal, those security relationships would not be open to us. Could we negotiate some for the future? That is, of course, possible, but it would require further negotiation and at the point of leaving those security relationships would be stopped.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I agree with the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), who has left the Chamber. The essence of what she was saying was that everyone should take a breath, take stock of what is on the table and look at the published Bill when it arrives on Friday. All colleagues across the House need to be mindful of the results of the European elections. The Prime Minister has said several times already that if the Second Reading of the Bill does not succeed, there will not be another opportunity to leave with a withdrawal Bill. The only course and direction will be to leave without any deal at all. Does she agree that anybody who claims to be against no deal, on whatever side of the House, should, without any commitments right now, give this proposition due consideration, think about how they would amend it, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said recently in a newspaper report, stop the shouting and start agreeing on what we can agree on to move forward?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. The point of the process of legislation that we have in this House is that once we are beyond Second Reading of the Bill it will be open to Members across the House to table amendments to it and to have those debates about the precise detail of how we are leaving. Anybody who wants to ensure that we leave with a deal and that we do not see a no-deal situation should support Second Reading and enter into that debate. That debate, of course, does not make commitments towards the end of that process. I hope that we would see the Bill passed and therefore the treaty ratified, but it will be open to have that debate while the Bill is progressing through the House.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As so often, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) speaks with a great deal of common sense. Will my right hon. Friend spell out what she has heard the consequences will be for our economy of leaving without a deal?

The Prime Minister: There have been a number of analyses of the impact of leaving without a deal. I think there would be an immediate impact economically of leaving without a deal. Over time, of course, we could restore our fortunes, but I think it is much better to be in a position where we are leaving with a deal, which will unleash. I believe, significant business investment in this country and see that positive future for our economy that is possible by leaving with a deal.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I have been listening to the Prime Minister respond to several questions about the consequences of no deal. Given what is likely to happen in the European Parliament elections tomorrow and in the Conservative party leadership election to follow, on which she has fired the starting gun, does she regret legitimising and normalising a no-deal outcome in the minds of the public through the repetition of the mantra, “No deal is better than a bad deal”?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not. No Government could have said they would accept whatever they were offered, rather than be willing to see no deal. If it had been a bad deal, I stand by what I said in relation to that matter. I also say to the right hon. Gentleman that anybody sitting in this Chamber who believes that we should not have a no-deal situation has to support a deal. That is the only way of making sure we do not leave with no deal. The vehicle for doing that, for determining the details of that leaving, is the withdrawal agreement Bill.
Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Unlike in 1831, the 1832 Reform Bill got through, because some of those who opposed the Government did not vote against it and that led to progress.

As a national interest Conservative, I have by choice voted with the Government on every single vote, because I think it is right. I hope that others who think that no deal is bad and that trying to reverse the referendum is bad do so.

The majority in this party, this House and the country would prefer to see the withdrawal agreement Bill at least get through Second Reading, so we can make progress and have a chance of a better future for our country.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely right. If we get through Second Reading, we can determine the details, through the progress of the Bill, of the precise nature of our leaving. That will enable us to see progress for this country. To pick up on what my hon. Friend said, I believe it is absolutely in the national interest that we should leave the European Union as the referendum vote set out, but that we should do it with a good deal for this country. That is what is on offer.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) asked the Prime Minister if she was intending to offer a free vote on the second referendum. I would like to ask her the same question about the customs arrangements, which she knows are extremely important for manufacturing industry. Would it be her plan to offer a free vote on those customs arrangements?

The Prime Minister: As in the normal progress of these things, whipping decisions will be taken when we see the proposals on the table. I reiterate the point I made in response to the right hon. Gentleman. The key issues raised around manufacturing industry are, yes, the benefits of a customs union—they are in the political declaration already—and ensuring we reduce friction for trade at the border. That is not just about customs, but the benefits of the customs union are in the political declaration already.

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a Lincolnshire grandee: Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Not so grand, Mr Speaker, but just a question. The Prime Minister knows of my warm, personal support for her. I voted for her deal not once, not twice but three times. I have to say, as somebody who wishes her well and wishes the agreement well, that I am worried about the tactics. I thought we had agreed with the EU that we were going to have binding indicative votes, which would enable people such as me to express our opposition to a permanent customs union or a referendum and vote for the withdrawal agreement. Now when it is not necessary, because Parliament could do it anyway. I have been asked to vote for a Bill that has, on the face of it, a nod towards a second referendum, which I believe would be disastrous to the Union and to the vast majority of people who voted for Brexit.

I ask the Prime Minister to be very cautious, to listen to our party, to remember that the one vote we won was on the Brady amendment, and, if we cannot get this through, that, given the incalculable disaster of losing the Bill and not being able to bring it back again in this Session, she will, if necessary, think again and not bring it back?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend refers to the indicative votes. I propose that during the passage of the Bill it will be possible to address these issues and to come to binding decisions on them—particularly the one he references on customs. The fact is that regardless of what indicative votes had been taken and what decisions had been put in the Bill from those indicative votes, had that been the way we progressed, those matters would have been within the scope of the Bill—it would still have been possible for Members to put down other amendments to that position and to vote differently from the way in which they had voted in the indicative votes. That is why it is better to bring these matters to the point of decision, which will be the point within the Bill where Members are deciding not just to indicate a position but what position comes into legislation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that I sincerely want to help her get a good deal through this House—but could she help me? My good, common-sense folk in Huddersfield, who are very clever people, are saying to me that, after three years and now that we know the full consequences of leaving the EU, why can they not have a chance to say what they think of the deal once it comes out of this House?

The Prime Minister: I have responded to similar points from the hon. Gentleman’s honourable and right honourable colleagues this afternoon. He wants to put a decision back to the people—we have to have a deal to do that, as I think he indicated at the end of his question—which means getting a withdrawal agreement Bill through, and it will be possible for the House to determine its position on this matter within that Bill. As he will know, the House has rejected a second referendum on a number of occasions, but at the point at which it takes that decision within the Bill it will be making that decision in a different environment. As I say, my position continues to be that we should deliver on the first referendum.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A choice between such distinguished colleagues—I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend must have noticed the response in this House and overnight to her statement. In proposing this folderol, is she going through the motions or does she really believe in it?

The Prime Minister: I do not think I would have been standing here at the Dispatch Box and have been in receipt of some of the comments that I have been in receipt of, from colleagues on my side and across the House; if I did not believe in what I was doing. I am doing it because I genuinely believe that it is in the national interest for us to leave the European Union with a deal. The only way to get a deal through is to get a withdrawal agreement Bill through this House. There are
issues that this House disagrees on. I believe that those issues should be put to the House and it will determine them. At that point, the House and all its Members will have to come to some decisions.

At the moment, it has been possible through indicative votes to give indications, but they have not been decisions that will be put into legislation. When the time comes to look at this matter, these will be decisions about what should go ahead in the Government’s position and what should be in legislation. People will not be able to duck the issues. It will be necessary to come to an agreement.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) does not need to chunter from a sedentary position. He is a very illustrious representative of Huddersfield, but the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has just used a noun that, I hazard a guess, has probably not been used on any other occasion in this Parliament, or if it has, only by the hon. Gentleman.

Alistair Burt: It is because he’s got a Lib Dem council now. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): What I welcomed most about the statement yesterday was its change in tone, which was markedly different from the ones that had gone before. I express my gratitude to the Prime Minister for the amount of time that she has personally spent with Members from across the House—including me—with whom she has disagreed but engaged in recent weeks. It is clear, though, that the contents of the statement yesterday have widened, not healed, divisions going forward. In the two weeks before the Bill comes before Parliament and this House, I urge her to carry on that engagement with an open mind and to enter into discussions at least about what can be changed on the face of the Bill going into Committee, in which case we will all have something to talk about. Otherwise, it is not even worth putting it forward in the first place.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I am happy to continue engaging across the House, as I have been, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I also suggest that, as his right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said, it will be helpful to all Members of the House to wait and see, when the Bill is published, what its actual terms are. He is encouraging me to put a position in the Bill with which I do not agree, but it is right that what we do in the Bill is enable this House to come to a decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A Hampshire knight who represents a beautiful forest—I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Out by the end of July, she says! A Brexiteer of whatever flavour could grant the Bill a Second Reading, saving their reservations for Committee, and make their final judgment on Third Reading, could they not? And what is a folderol?

Mr Speaker: There are different definitions. A showy and useless item, allegedly, or an unnecessary or inconsequential fuss, or something—but that is only the view of the matter from the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). I am not expressing any view on that matter. I was just intrigued by the endless lexicon of the hon. Gentleman.

The Prime Minister: I have to say, I think that when my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) used that word, he was not intending it to be complimentary about the package that the Government have brought forward. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) is absolutely right: for the Bill to get through, for the treaty to be ratified and for us to be able to leave at the end of July, it is about not only getting Second Reading through but ensuring that the Bill is confirmed on Third Reading. By getting through Second Reading, it is possible to have those debates during the progress of the Bill on the key issues that remain and on which there remains disagreement between Members of this House, such that it will be possible—I believe—to come to an agreement that can see us leave the European Union.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister has made it clear that she does not intend to put a commitment to a second referendum in the Bill on Second Reading. In the spirit of compromise, therefore, will she commit to giving her MPs a free vote in Committee when we debate and vote on that measure?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, what we intend to put in the Bill is the commitment to have a vote on whether to have a second referendum and that the Bill cannot be completed and the treaty ratified until that vote has taken place. I hope that that gives confirmation to Members of the House who are in favour of a second referendum that that issue will be addressed properly within the passage of the Bill. As I said, whipping decisions will be taken closer to the time. I note the keenness of some Opposition Members to determine what the whipping arrangements for Government Members should be, but with no reference to their own whipping arrangements.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister asks what it would say about democracy if we put this back to the public. The Leader of the Opposition has said from the Dispatch Box that if the Prime Minister likes her deal so much—this is roughly what he said—she should not be afraid of putting it back to the people, and I agree with him. She is putting it back to us time after time after time when we have already rejected it time after time after time. Why does she not trust the people? Why will she not go back to them and ask them what she thinks of her deal?

The Prime Minister: I do trust the people. That is why I believe that it is our duty to put in place what the people asked us to do.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): After weeks of negotiations between a pro-Brexit Prime Minister and a pro-Brexit Labour leadership, it is clear that we have not been able to get an agreement on the terms of
this process. It is also clear that no Parliament can bind its successor and no lame-duck Prime Minister can bind her successor. Is it not clear that this Parliament is unable to resolve these matters and that we should go back to the people in a people’s vote, or, if we are unable to do that, revoke article 50 and have more time to find a way forward?

The Prime Minister: It is clear from the Court judgment that we cannot just revoke article 50 to create more time to consider a deal and then re-trigger it and go back into a negotiating process. Once we revoke, we revoke, and we stay in. I believe we should not stay in. We should leave.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In her statement, the Prime Minister said that “to address concerns that a future Government could roll back hard-won protections for employees, we will publish a new workers’ rights Bill”.

It was this Government who rolled back those protections in the anti-trade union Bill. If she is serious about workers’ rights, will she reinstate those lost protections in this new Bill?

The Prime Minister: The Government have enhanced workers’ rights and are putting in place the recommendations from the Taylor review. Ours is the first Government to consider seriously what workers’ rights are suitable for the economy of today. We have enhanced workers’ rights and will continue to do so.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I will support the Bill when it comes to the Floor of the House for the simple reason that it is the only deal on the table that will protect under international law the rights of British citizens living in the EU as well as those of EU nationals living here. I am grateful for the comments the Prime Minister made last September following Salzburg about unilaterally protecting certain rights of EU nationals. I regret that there was no mention of British citizens in her statement. What message does she have for British citizens living in the EU?

The Prime Minister: My message has been consistent. It is that we have been working for their interests as well as those of EU citizens living in the UK. That is why I was pleased that we achieved the reciprocity in the withdrawal agreement—it is an important part of the withdrawal agreement and therefore of the withdrawal agreement Bill. We continue to work with the other 27 member states to ensure they can confirm that in a no-deal situation—as I say—that remains the legal default—they would also protect the rights of British citizens living in those 27 member states.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): This is the Prime Minister’s deal. Others in the House want to leave on WTO rules; some want Norway plus; some common market 2.0; others Canada plus—the list goes on and on. Which option does she think the people voted for in 2016, and how can the Government know that their definition of Brexit is the option people voted for without asking them?

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): With the inevitable end nigh for the Prime Minister and our still being in the EU under an extension to an extension, and with burning injustices still unextinguished everywhere, will the Prime Minister tell us, under her premiership, factoring in the two new Ministries she has created, the civil servants from all over redeployed to this exercise and her costly and sometimes incompetent no-deal planning experiments—she now tells us no deal would be a bad thing—how much Brexit has cost the public purse?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well that the Treasury’s figures for the two Departments preparing for Brexit, in whatever form it takes, have been made public. She alludes to other work the Government have undertaken. I am very pleased that this Government introduced, for example, the race disparity audit and that we are taking action to ensure that those in certain communities who find it harder to get into the workplace are given the support they need, and introducing changes to domestic abuse legislation. There are many areas where this Government are acting to deal with exactly the injustices I have referred to previously.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister knows that her promises are only valid for as long as she is Prime Minister—that is probably now measured in hours rather than days—because her successor can tear them up. Even if the House were to vote for what has come to be known as “May’s Brexit mayhem”, we could end up with “Boris’s Brexit boorach”. Is it any surprise that the people of Scotland are not prepared to accept that and that tomorrow they will once again declare our determination that our nation remain in the EU? If her nation insists on leaving, it had better reconcile itself to leaving without us.

The Prime Minister: For those in Scotland who want us to leave the EU with a deal that is good for the whole United Kingdom, including Scotland, there is only one party to vote for, and that is the Conservatives, and for those in Scotland who want Scotland to remain part of what is, economically and in other ways, its most important union—the United Kingdom—there is only one party to vote for, and that is the Conservatives.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Prime Minister states that those of us seeking a public vote should support her withdrawal agreement and make our case to Parliament on Second Reading, but we have already and repeatedly made our case in the Chamber for a public confirmatory vote. If the Prime Minister wishes
to be bold with her new offer, she must allow the public a voice on her deal, which would be democratic. Does she agree?

The Prime Minister: I think I answered that question earlier. I refer the hon. Lady to that answer.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): At the latest count, eight Ministers or Members of Parliament who sit beside or around the Prime Minister are jostling for her job. Most, if not all, appear to be enthusiastic endorsers of a kamikaze no deal. Given what she knows about no deal, can she understand why any of those candidates would want to advocate one?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman can leave the issue of the determination of the leadership of the Conservative party to the Conservative party. The House has to decide whether it wants to leave the EU with or without a deal. The withdrawal agreement Bill is the vehicle that enables us to ensure we leave with a deal.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been very clear that she believes that her deal is what the public want, but she is also very clear that she is not supporting a second referendum or confirmatory vote. Does she see the inconsistency in that argument? What is she scared of?

The Prime Minister: It is very simple. As I say, if we get through Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill, it will be possible for people who want a second referendum to put that case to the House and for the House to come to a decision on that matter. I have made changes to the offer I have put forward. I set those out today in my statement to the House. They reflect the discussions we have had across the House and address concerns raised by Members.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In her statement, the Prime Minister talked a lot about compromise. I agree that compromise is required. Since the referendum result in 2016, the Scottish Government have sought to compromise. Can she name one single part of the document “Scotland’s Place in Europe” that she agreed to compromise on?

The Prime Minister: We have had discussions with both the Scottish and Welsh Governments about their concerns, particularly around trade across the EU, and our proposals reflect those concerns, together with our discussions with business across the whole UK. As I understand it, the position of the Scottish nationalists now is that they want to revoke article 50. That is not a compromise. It is a position that goes back on the result of the referendum.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): MPs from around the House have suggested that the Prime Minister’s deal is not sustainable because she has announced her resignation and that it is not future-proofed. Does she agree that neither her deal nor any other deal can be future-proofed or sustainable unless entrenched by a public confirmatory vote? On that basis, if she wants to heal the wounds and make it sustainable, she should put that public confirmatory vote in the Bill itself.

The Prime Minister: No, I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is wrong. The concern people have about entrenching for the future is about the objectives for negotiating in the future stages. Those will not be determined by a people’s vote—by a second referendum—because, by definition, they will be part of a negotiation with the European Union in the future. Nobody can say at this stage absolutely what will come out of those negotiations; it will be part of a process.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): I spent 24 years on the frontline of the NHS, and like the vast majority of clinicians, I am desperately worried about the impact of a no-deal Brexit—a WTO Brexit—on the NHS, social care, science and research, and public health. I really want to help the Prime Minister get her deal across the line if it is subject to a confirmatory vote, but I do not believe it has the consent of even the loudest voices among the Brexiteers, let alone of constituents across this nation. Will she please commit to ending all this? Her deal would get across the line with the support of so many colleagues across this House if she would just agree to make sure that it was genuinely the will of the people?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady wants to ensure that we do not leave without a deal, and she wants to press the case for a second referendum, the way to do that is to vote for Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill. Then, during the progress of that Bill, we will be able to have that debate about a second referendum and, indeed, about other issues on which there is disagreement across this House and come to a determination on them. That is the proper process to follow; it is the process that enables this House to take that decision.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The reality is that we are getting the same withdrawal agreement coming back that has already been rejected three times, with some additional legislation on things such as workers’ rights, which the Government could have brought forward over the last nine years. The political reality is that the Prime Minister’s deal is not going to pass in this House unless there is a guarantee of a second referendum. Why is she willing to risk her deal rather than reach a compromise?

The Prime Minister: What I want to see is this House voting to leave the European Union with a deal. I have compromised, and I have moved on the issues that have been raised as concerns by Members across this House. There are two elements of the deal with the European Union—the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. We have made it clear that we will be seeking changes to the political declaration to reflect the package that I have put to the House today. It is important for the House to make decisions on this matter and to ensure that we can deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum, but to do that with a good deal.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): May I strongly urge the Prime Minister to look across this House and to understand, as I am sure she does, that there is no majority for any version of Brexit compromise, or therefore for her Bill? That is causing so much harm to our businesses, our communities and our democracy. The only
way to avoid the threat of no deal and to get this Bill passed is to put a confirmatory vote back to the people for a democratic say.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about the impact of the situation we are in on British business. Yes, uncertainty is never good for business, and business always wants to have the certainty of knowing the way forward, but what she proposes will not remove that uncertainty from British business—

Anna McMorin indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry, but it will increase the period of uncertainty for the British people. Anything that extends the point of decision making actually increases that uncertainty for a further period of time. It will be for this House to decide. If the hon. Lady is certain of her arguments, she should not be worried about the House having the opportunity to hear those arguments and make a decision.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that the Prime Minister has indicated that she will publish a new workers’ rights Bill, will she confirm whether the publication of that Bill relies on the withdrawal agreement Bill being passed? It seems to me that the House could decide to pass the workers’ rights Bill and not the withdrawal agreement Bill. Will she also say how the workers’ rights Bill will work in practice? I am thinking specifically of rights for workers in the gig economy, where Europe seems to be offering better and stronger protections than those that our Government have proposed in relation to the Taylor report.

The Prime Minister: What will happen is that the withdrawal agreement Bill will be published and the draft workers’ rights Bill will be published, and we will see them progressing in tandem.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has repeatedly talked about having a democratic mandate. However, the Information Commissioner’s Office found repeated data breaches in Cambridge Analytica’s work for Vote Leave, and Chris Wylie, the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, said:

“If we allow cheating in our democratic process … what about next time? What about the time after that? This is a breach of the law. This is cheating… this is an irreversible change to the constitutional settlement of this country.”

Does the Prime Minister not really need a democratic mandate for this withdrawal agreement, considering how tampered with and damaged the campaign was in the last referendum?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to issues in relation to the conduct of the last referendum. Of course, the Electoral Commission has acted on a number of the issues, but if we look across what happened, we see one of the most significant exercises in democracy in our history from people who came out to vote in the referendum. What the hon. Gentleman is saying is that we cannot actually trust the British people to exercise their vote according to their judgment and their instincts. I believe that is what the British people did, and we should listen to them.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Yesterday, in her prequel to this statement, the Prime Minister referred euphemistically to the “devolved lock” that would come forward as part of the withdrawal agreement Bill, but her comments did not stretch as far as whether legislative consent would be required from the devolved Administrations. Will she therefore confirm that she accepts that legislative consent will be required for the Bill and that she will accept the mandate given to her by the Scottish Parliament as to whether it will grant legislative consent?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is, I am sure, very clear about the legislative consent requirements that relate to the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government in relation to these matters. Of course, I am well aware that the Scottish Government have made it clear that they do not wish to give legislative consent to matters that are put forward in relation to this issue, but we will be discussing that with the Scottish Government when the time comes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What is the purpose of bringing forward withdrawal agreement mark 4 if no attempt has been made to address the backstop, which continues to be a key obstacle to any way forward? I reiterate firmly but gently that we seek and need protection for Northern Ireland that is both legally binding and time-limited. What talks have there been, and what effort has been made, to address the backstop?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman has raised this point with me on a number of occasions. As he knows, we have had a number of discussions with the European Union that have led to further commitments in relation to alternative arrangements, for example, and we will also enshrine those in UK domestic legislation. The key issue about the separation of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is one we have committed to dealing with. As I said in my statement, we will work with our confidence and supply partner, the DUP, to look at how that commitment can best be enshrined in law.
British Steel

2.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about British Steel.

It was announced this morning that the court has granted an application by the directors of British Steel to enter an insolvency process. Control of the company will now pass to the official receiver, an employee of the Insolvency Service, who will run a compulsory liquidation. The official receiver has made it clear that British Steel employees will continue to be paid and employed, and the business will continue to trade and to supply its customers while he considers the company’s position. In fact, employees were paid early, with the May payroll being run yesterday through cash being advanced by the company’s lenders.

As the House will recall, I made a statement on 1 May setting out details of a bridging facility that the Government agreed to provide to ensure that British Steel was able to meet its obligations under the EU emissions trading scheme, which fell due on 30 April. The Government provided the facility to purchase allowances worth £120 million against the security of 2019 ETS allowances, which are currently suspended pending ratification of the withdrawal agreement.

Without this facility, British Steel would have faced a financial pressure of over £600 million—the ETS liability, plus a £500 million fine. This would not only have placed British Steel in an insolvent financial position, but the charge attached to its operational assets would have been likely to prevent any new owner from acquiring these assets in the future. This transaction demonstrated the Government’s continuing willingness to work closely with all parties to secure the long-term success of this important business.

Following this agreement, the Government have worked intensively with the company for many weeks to seek solutions to the broader financial challenges it has been facing. The Government and individual Ministers can only act within the law and this requires that any financial support to a steel company must be made on a commercial basis. In the case of the ETS facility, this was based on the security of future ETS allowances.

To provide liquidity to the business in the face of its cash-flow difficulties the Government were willing to consider making a cash loan to the company and worked hard to investigate exhaustively the possibilities. However, the absence of adequate security, no reasonable prospect that any loan would have been repaid and the shareholder being unwilling to provide a sufficient cash injection itself meant that this did not meet the required legal tests.

I am placing in the Library the accounting officer’s assessment of these proposals, drawing on professional and legal advice, which concludes:

“It would be unlawful to provide a guarantee or loan on the terms of any of the proposals that the company or any other party has made or any others we have considered. You must note that such an offer cannot be made legally and that by making it you would be in breach of the Ministerial Code.”

The insolvency removes Greybull from day-to-day control of British Steel. Given the Government’s willingness to help secure British Steel’s future, demonstrated in the ETS facility, and the discussions that have taken place in recent weeks, the Government will work closely with the official receiver and prospective new owners to achieve the best outcome for these sites.

The Government have provided an indemnity to the official receiver, who is now responsible for the operations. We will take every possible step to ensure that these vital operations can continue, that jobs are secured and that the sites at Scunthorpe and Skinningrove and on Teesside continue to be important centres of excellent steelworking. During the days and weeks ahead, I will work with the official receiver, the special managers and a British Steel support group of trade unions, management, suppliers, customers and the local communities to pursue remorselessly every possible step to secure the future of these valuable operations.

This is a very worrying time for everyone associated with British Steel. Each one of British Steel’s sites has a proud record of steelmaking excellence, and I am determined to see it continue. Britain and the world will continue to need high-quality steel, and British steel is among the best in the world. Today is a very big setback for these operations, but it is far from being the end and we will take every step possible to secure a successful future for these vital assets, both people and plant.

2.33 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

This is indeed very worrying news for the workers, their families and the communities who rely on British Steel directly in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Teesside and all the way through the supply chain. At least 25,000 people will have been worried sick this morning, wondering whether they will have a job this time next week.

As the Secretary of State knows, however, the sector is critical to our manufacturing base and is strategically important for Government procurement from rail all the way through to defence. It is therefore imperative, given that the Government now have some control via the official receiver, that this business is stabilised and confidence is given to customers, workers and businesses right across the supply chain. The message from the Government today must be that British Steel is one of the linchpins of our industrial strategy and to that end they will move heaven and earth to ensure business as usual continues.

It is reported that the owner, Greybull Capital, was asking the Government for a loan of £30 million. The shadow Minister for steel, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), asked for more information yesterday, but we were given none. Can the Secretary of State confirm today what the asks of British Steel were in the negotiations? Were they just the reported £30 million or was that part of a wider package of measures to support steel production?

I welcome the publication of the accounting officer’s assessment, but can the Secretary of State confirm Greybull Capital’s reasoning in asking for a loan, while reportedly being unwilling to put money on the table and simultaneously investing over £40 million in a French steelworks last week?

The Secretary of State has said in his press statement today that he will “pursue remorselessly every possible step to secure the future of the valuable operations in sites at Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and on Teesside.”
and I welcome that. I also welcome the indemnity he has referred to, but can he outline exactly what other possible steps he will be pursuing in the coming days?

Do they include bringing British Steel into public ownership as Unite the union and the Labour party have called for? Do they include discussions with other interested stakeholders to examine options for saving the company, including with Network Rail, which procures 95% of its rails from the Scunthorpe site? It is clear that we simply cannot countenance warm words and no real action as was the case with the SSI steelworks almost four years ago.

The truth of the matter is that the cost of British Steel collapsing is far greater than any short-term outlay the Government must make now. The Institute for Public Policy Research has estimated that British Steel’s collapse could lead to £2.8 billion in lost wages, £1.1 billion in lost revenue and extra benefit payments and that it could reduce household spending by £1.2 billion over 10 years. This is a significant economic disturbance, if the Secretary of State would like to dust off his state aid handbook.

We know Network Rail sources 95% of its rails from Scunthorpe. Last year, Network Rail signed a £200 million contract with the company. The loss of this supply could have serious consequences for Network Rail’s cost base and the quality of the steel used to maintain and upgrade the British rail network. Notwithstanding the great commitment by Network Rail to British Steel, however, we also know the Government’s wider public procurement of UK steel has been disappointing, with only 43% of steel used in Government projects traced to firms based in the UK, according to UK Steel analysis.

So will the Secretary of State confirm today what steps he is taking to positively procure British steel for more of our key infrastructure projects?

Finally, there is no doubt that the UK steel industry is in a difficult place. Uncertainty about future trade with the EU and the dangling prospect of no deal are having a severe impact. Domestic issues like uncompetitive electricity prices, business rates and lack of support for steel in the so-called industrial strategy are also undermining the sector’s ability to compete, but UK steel has a proud history in the UK and there is no reason why this cannot continue. The ball is in the Government’s court: we in the Opposition know which side of history we want to be on, and I hope the Secretary of State wants the same thing.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. For the spirit in which she approached her response to the statement, recognising that there is a total common purpose across both sides of the House to provide the confidence for new investors to be able to take on these assets, and we all, wherever we sit in this Chamber, want this to be a change of ownership rather than something that puts a stop to steel production.

The hon. Lady was right to refer to SSI, and she will recall—as will her colleague the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—the situation with Corus in 2010. One thing we know about steel assets in that they are not like other kinds of facilities; once they close, it is very difficult for them to come back into life.

So it seems to me that we have a special responsibility to make every effort to ensure there is no interruption whatsoever in production. That is my purpose, and I see it reflected in what the hon. Lady said.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the strategic importance of steel. It presents a strategic opportunity as well, because this country and the world will always need steel and British steel is among the best in the world, so we should be looking to supply it. I think my commitment was demonstrated in the move I made to provide £120 million to make sure that the liability under the ETS was addressed. Crucially, if we had not removed that liability, it would have hung over the assets, preventing any new partner from taking them on.

The hon. Lady also asked about the reports of the £30 million facility. The assessment of the accounting officer gives more information on that. In fact, that £30 million was not for a permanent refinancing of British Steel; it was a contribution to an administration only. The assessment was that the contribution from all parties would not be enough to withstand the cost requirements during that administration. She will see clearly set out the assessment of the proposals that were given. I have been exhaustive in pursuing the possibilities with British Steel over many weeks. If she is in government, she will find that she is obliged to follow the ministerial code, under which we are not allowed to make a decision that would be illegal, immensely frustrating though it is. I would have much preferred to have given the opportunity of this loan rather than go down the route that has been taken, but that is the requirement and there is no possibility of setting that aside.

On the motivation of Greybull in investing its cash in other facilities in France, one of the requirements in the case of any company failure is that the official receiver conducts an investigation into the reasons for the failure and the lessons to be drawn from it. I very much look forward to seeing the official receiver’s report. I dare say that the Chair of the Select Committee will also want to inquire closely, on behalf of her colleagues, into this as well.

On the question of new possibilities, I understand that there are buyers who have already made contact. The hon. Lady is right to say that important stakeholders such as Network Rail, which has been very supportive in recent weeks and has pledged to continue to be supportive, will work together. That is why I have invited everyone with an interest in this, including colleagues on both sides of the House, to work together so that we can make a demonstrable and clear case that the cross-party and cross-House of Commons consensus that reflects the importance of the steel sector is available to any new investor.

Finally, I agree with the hon. Lady’s assessment, relating to the report she mentioned, that the consequences are important not only for the workforce and those in the supply chain, vital though they are; they are also important for whole communities and indeed for the country. This furthers my resolve, which I know she shares, to do everything we can in the days and weeks ahead to ensure that there is continuity in these operations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues, I will shortly come to Members with constituency interests, and indeed to the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington),
the former Minister, but I would like to begin with a new, young Member who once worked for British Steel. I call Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): That was quite some time ago, Mr Speaker, when it was the British Steel Corporation rather than the old Appleby-Frodingham steel plant that we are discussing today.

I put it to my right hon. Friend that we ought to go on following his non-partisan line, but we ought also to remember what happened to steel production and steel employment during the last Government. Will he also tell us what can be done on energy costs, which form a large part of steel production costs?

Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this is an industry in which the worldwide steel cycle has a massive impact? The House will be grateful to him for doing all that he can to mitigate its effects on this country.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. I was unaware that he had had that early experience in the steel sector. I do not want to make a partisan point, so perhaps I can take this in a historical sense to illustrate that the steel sector has been through periods of turbulence and difficulty in this country and around the world, and it is clearly going through one now. It was the case that steel production fell by 50% between 1997 and 2010, as did employment in the sector, but I do not blame that on the Government of the day. It was a feature of the market at the time, but I think that we should learn the lessons from some of the decisions that were taken then.

[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Middlesbrough reminds us from a sedentary position that the blast furnaces at Redcar were mothballed, which made it difficult to return them to service. They did come back with SSI, but it was very difficult to do that. The point is that we should have the maximum possible continuity, and attend to the lessons from that time. Criticisms were made at the time of the approach being taken both there and in SSI, and in the present situation we should learn the lessons and ensure that we have maximum continuity.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement.

Since I was sworn in as a Member of this House four years ago, I have watched two Tory Prime Ministers and two Business Secretaries fail the steel sector across the UK. Time and again, they have refused to level the playing field for steel in relation to energy costs and to rates in England. I have been happy to show solidarity with those in the steel sector who face the prospect of not having a job and with those who work in the supply chains. We cannot keep on repeating this.

The UK Government need to achieve a sector deal for steel and, by their actions, fully commit to the steel industry’s future across the UK. A first step would be to listen to the industry and its concerns on Brexit, and I am glad to hear the Secretary of State say that he will do that. The inaction and apathy of this Government and this Prime Minister towards industry are reminiscent of another Tory Prime Minister. We are still recovering from the damage that Margaret Thatcher did to the steel industry in Scotland. Do this Tory Government recognise the danger inherent in pursuing their current policy regarding industrial strategy?

In 2015, by contrast, the SNP Scottish Government saved the Scottish steel industry. They saved the Dalzell works in my constituency and the Clydebridge works in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituency. Indeed, I am going there on Wednesday to sign the UK steel charter with the Scottish Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation. Will the Secretary of State look to what was done by the SNP Scottish Government in setting up a Scottish steel taskforce and commit to saving steel across the UK? The Scottish steel taskforce was a model committed to saving those works, and it did so because it started out with that commitment as its sole objective, by contrast to the UK steel summit that we had in 2015. Minister, you have a grave responsibility here and I hope that you will come back and tell us that you have achieved what we all want for British Steel.

Greg Clark: I recognise that responsibility, and the intention of the group that the hon. Lady describes is precisely what I have set out. We all need to join forces to provide the best prospect for continuity for these operations. She referred to the important steelworks in Scotland. Sometimes, for the reasons I have set out, it is necessary for a Government to participate in a sector where discontinuities and interruptions can be difficult to recover from. I think she would be generous enough to concede that the £120 million that I informed the House of on 1 May gave precisely the possibility for these operations to continue, without which we would have been unable to have this discussion today about the prospects for the industry.

[Interrupted.] The hon. Lady asked about energy costs. Energy-intensive industries obviously incur significantly higher energy costs than other sectors. Over the past few years, we have paid £291 million in compensation to energy-intensive sectors, including steel. The industrial strategy contains an industrial energy transformation fund to increase the energy efficiency of energy-intensive operations, and that is worth about a third of a billion pounds. That constitutes, I think, the kind of action that she would expect. We now need to ensure that that is applied to the situation facing British Steel so that it can continue to operate and, indeed, to flourish.

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to speed up a little bit.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which will be hugely reassuring to my constituents who work at Skinningrove steelworks, most of whom live close by. It is vital that we prevent the closure of that plant, just as it is vital that we prevent closures at Scunthorpe and Lackenby and all the other sites that are affected. With that in mind, I welcome that the Government have provided the indemnity to the official receiver to try to keep British Steel operational while a buyer is sought. Beyond that, may I emphasise the case for public ownership or, indeed, a public-private partnership to serve as a bridge to new ownership? The priority is to save jobs. Everything else—all matters of ideology—must come second.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to do everything we can. The situation is not entirely in the hands of the Government, because the official receiver is obviously responsible for the operations,
and the trade unions and local communities want also to participate. This morning, the director general of UK Steel was asked whether he thought that the Government have done everything they can, and he said that he thought that we have. There is a recognition, which I am sure my hon. Friend will find in the sector, that we are serious about doing everything we can within our legal limits to help to give stability and a good future to this industry.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): This is a desperately sad day for our steel industry and those who work in it, and I am sure that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will want to look at what triggered the collapse of the company. The Government are now paying the wages of British Steel’s workers, which is welcome, and 25,000 jobs depend on production continuing. Will British Steel continue to take new orders under the Government’s official receiver to maximise the chances of the company’s survival? Will the Government guarantee to pay the wages and continue new production at the site until a new buyer can be found?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I would welcome her Select Committee, on which many Members currently in the Chamber serve, looking into this matter. There may be wider lessons to learn about how assets of such importance, where continuity is important, are held.

When it comes to paying the employees’ wages, we should be clear that the official receiver is responsible for that, not the Government. The Government have provided the official receiver with an indemnity, and his responsibility is to manage the business and to make a judgment about the business’s future prospects. He started today with a clear statement that the business continues to trade and that the workforce continue to be employed and to be paid. I hope that that was reassuring for the members of staff.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): On behalf of the thousands of my constituents whose livelihoods rely on Scunthorpe, may I thank the Secretary of State for his personal interest and dedication? He has worked incredibly hard to try to find a solution here. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) about not applying any ideology to the ownership model moving forward. We want to keep this site together, and we do not want any cherry-picking if it can be avoided.

Will the Secretary of State also encourage the official receiver to work with North Lincolnshire Council and the local enterprise partnership, which commissioned and paid for a study into how British Steel could make better use of other parts of the site to generate money? Some of it could be used for energy generation or for housing, but such proposals have not been taken forward by the current owners. Will he ensure that the official receiver looks closely at that?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I will certainly do that. As I said, the official receiver is independent, but it is very much in his interests to maximise the opportunities on the sites that are now in his charge, and I dare say that that study will be helpful.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we should not take an ideological approach. We need to do what is right for the jobs and livelihoods of the people who work in and around those sites.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his Ministers and officials for their work over a long period to get this business to where we all want it to be. I thank him for his statement, the commitments in it and his recognition of the strategic value of this industry and the business not just to the workers and families in my constituency and others but to the UK. Will he commit to ensure that these national assets are secure and to involve the workforce in all discussions through the excellent trade unions that work in the steel industry, so that they can be full partners as we take this business into a better future?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The town that he represents has a proud history of steelmaking, and I want that to continue for many years. It should be making history in the future, as it has done in the past. It is vital in that to reflect the sense of community in the steel industry, both in particular places and across the country. Through my contact with the trade unions and the workforce, I will certainly involve them in the discussions about the future, and I will encourage the official receiver, who will want to benefit from those discussions, to do the same.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), said in answer to yesterday’s urgent question that he and the Secretary of State would leave no stone unturned to save British Steel. As a former Minister in this area, I can confirm that the Secretary of State’s commitment is second to none.

I was impressed with British Steel. Some of its management was very good, as was the workforce. The trade unions had a responsible attitude, and I want to pick out Roy Rickhuss of the Community union, who is very committed to this site. It seems to me that the company has a good business plan. It produces a product that people throughout the world want to buy, but one of the main dangers, and one of the reasons behind this situation, is the threat of WTO rules and the disgraceful tariffs that this country would be lumbered with if this House was not sensible and did not vote for a deal to rule out the burden that WTO rules would have on the steel industry.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the hard work that he put into understanding and helping the steel industry during his time as a Minister. I know that it was well appreciated. I echo his tribute to Roy Rickhuss. My hon. Friend, the new Minister and I have always had a good relationship with the trade unions. I spoke to Roy Rickhuss and Steve Turner of Unite this morning, and they share the intention of everyone in this House to get the best possible future for British Steel.

One reason, although it is not the only reason, for the problems that British Steel is experiencing is the uncertainty around whether our future relationship with the European Union will involve tariffs—at least that is what the
management say. Like my hon. Friend, I have a high regard for the management of British Steel, which needs to be taken at its word. We should resolve that uncertainty as quickly as possible, because that would be a major contribution that we can make to the future of British Steel.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his approach in recent weeks and for his statement today. I thank him for his comments about the difficulty of turning off steel mills like a tap, because they cannot be turned off and on like that. We are all grateful to hear that the wages will continue to be paid for the moment and that the company continues to trade. Will he say anything more about the official receiver’s capacity to keep the situation going so that a new buyer can be found?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what the right hon. Gentleman says. It is important that I should state, and that the House should recognise, that the official receiver is independently appointed by the court. The official receiver has a team of special managers from Ernst & Young who were appointed today, and their responsibility is to secure the best possible resolution for the assets they inherit. They have strict duties to the court, and they cannot be directed by me. My experience of the Insolvency Service and the official receiver is that they will want to recognise the importance of continuity, which I contend will help to secure the best value for the future of the site. From my conversations, I know they have that very much in mind, but it is important to emphasise that they are independent and do not take direction from me.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I impress upon my right hon. Friend the expectation of my constituents in Corby that he must pull out all the stops to secure the future of this business. Will he advise the House of whether any other steel businesses have indicated a willingness to take on the business at this stage?

Greg Clark: I certainly agree with, and will act upon, the first part of my hon. Friend’s question. It is a matter for the official receiver to consider, but during the course of the day—after all, it was just this morning that the company went to court—I have had some early indications of interest. I intend to be active in helping to promote these important assets to prospective investors, whether or not they are currently aware of the opportunity this may give them to invest in successful facilities in the future.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for engaging with me constructively on the phone this morning, which I appreciate. I also pay tribute to all those at British Steel who have worked so hard, particularly over the last three years, to try to make a success of the company. I was proud to be at the launch at the Lackenby beam mill in 2016 when, out of the ashes of the SSI disaster, we felt that British Steel would rise and be a strong, fantastic brand. Obviously, today is extremely disappointing for those workers and for others all across the country.

I implore the Secretary of State to learn the lessons of SSI from 2016. He spoke movingly today of the importance of keeping the assets going, which is the No. 1 priority. We cannot turn this off because of the consequences for individuals, for families, for communities and for local economies. We are still facing the clean-up costs, three years down the line, of a rotting, decaying site that is still toxic. That cannot be allowed to happen again. We must ensure that the assets are maintained and preserved and jobs safeguarded.

Greg Clark: I grew up in the hon. Lady’s constituency, and I am very familiar with the landscape of steelmaking across Teesside. We need to learn the lessons of this. Across the country, including in Scotland, as we have heard, there have been times when the steel industry has been challenged. Not everything has been done in the best way each time. We should learn the lessons and apply them in this case. I hope that the official receiver will do that, and the indemnity is partly given to provide the official receiver with the confidence that the liabilities, especially the safety aspects, will be covered.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that, for any business to succeed, it is vital to look after the needs of the customer, so will he say a little more about the steps being taken to maintain the continuity of supply to manufacturers and contractors of the excellent, high-quality products produced by British Steel?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The company benefits from very good relationships with customers, and I particularly mention Network Rail. This is important to both sides of that relationship. Network Rail has been particularly understanding and supportive during British Steel’s difficulties, and I hope very much that Network Rail will be part of the solution to resolving the difficulties facing the operations.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Government need to buy more UK-produced steel, yet the Ministry of Defence has refused to confirm that it will buy UK steel for the Navy’s solid support ships. Less than half of the steel currently bought by the Government is from the UK. How high will that percentage be in a year’s time to help avoid recurring steel crises?

Greg Clark: I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that we have taken some major steps. First, we have published the proportion of UK steel procured for each Department. Secondly, we have changed the procurement rules so that social and environmental factors can be taken into account in future procurement. Thirdly, we have published a future pipeline of opportunities. We have done all those things because I agree with his contention that, where we have good-quality British steel that can be used for purposes in this country, we should be making use of it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like my colleagues, I congratulate the Secretary of State and his ministerial team on their efforts and on keeping Members informed. He knows north Lincolnshire well, and he will be mindful of the fact that some 200 people are employed at the port of Immingham either by British Steel or by associated companies. Can he give those businesses and their employees an assurance that, when Government decisions are made in future, those associated industries will be at the forefront of his mind?
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right that the impact of an industry such as steelmaking extends beyond its own limits, and he gives a good example of that. It is important that those impacts are reflected. Obviously, because the business is trading, suppliers can count on being paid now that they have the protection of the official receiver. I hope that will give them confidence, which was perhaps knocked in recent weeks when there were widespread rumours of the company’s cash-flow difficulties.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Steelworkers in the community I represent will be very much thinking of those at British Steel sites who are affected by today’s announcement. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that the uncertainty around thousands of jobs, including those in the supply chain, could pose a threat to other steel companies because of the potential weakening of the supply chain? The Government must show by their actions that they value manufacturing.

Greg Clark: It is important that we consider and act on the impact on the wider supply chain, and the group I propose to bring together to support British Steel will include representatives of the suppliers. I will set out further details of how we might do that in the days ahead.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Energy-intensive industries like steel and other manufacturers in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South have come under increasing pressure from high energy costs. Will my right hon. Friend outline more of the measures that the Government are taking to address those high energy costs?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The ceramics industry shares the concerns of the steel industry in needing relief from high energy costs. The industrial energy transformation fund is available to the ceramics industry, and I hope it will come forward with proposals that can reduce energy consumption and, in that way, reduce energy bills so making industry more competitive— that applies to ceramics as it does to steel.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I, too, am grateful for the Secretary of State’s approach to this challenge. Hours before the collapse, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), said from the Dispatch Box yesterday that no stone had been left unturned in the run-up to this, which implies that the collapse was inevitable. I do not believe such a collapse is ever inevitable. First, as we move forward, will the Secretary of State reconfirm that he will do everything he possibly can to make sure this plant carries on trading for as long as it takes to get back on its feet? Secondly, will he do everything he can to get a sector deal, for which the steel industry has been crying out for a very long time, up and running?

Greg Clark: I will continue to do everything I can. It is important to level with the House that I do not run these operations and these assets—they are under the control of the official receiver—but I will do what I can to interest prospective partners with a long-term interest in this. I will continue to leave no stone unturned.

As with the solution to the emissions trading scheme problem, I will be creative where I possibly can be in finding solutions.

The second point was—

Peter Kyle: The sector deal.

Greg Clark: The sector deal was proposed in the industrial strategy. I am keen that there should be a sector deal in the steel industry, but the essence of a sector deal, as the hon. Gentleman knows from his work on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, is mutual investment by both sides. There is a good plan there, but one difficulty at the moment—British Steel is a good example of this—is that it has not been possible to see the investment coming in that is the hallmark of every sector deal. I very much want us to have that, and I hope that in talking to new partners we might have an opportunity for that sector deal to be completed, because in every sector deal we have the new investment that is required.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I entirely support what my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) have said about an innovative public-private approach to this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State talked in his statement about the accounting officer’s assessment, which said: “It would be unlawful to provide a guarantee or loan”.

Will he confirm what the situation would be with regard to equity capital, in the context of a public-private partnership or other innovative solutions such as those that have been mentioned?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. As I said to colleagues, we should not allow any ideology to influence these decisions, but he is right to draw attention to the accounting officer’s opinion and advice on this, which includes an assessment that makes it clear that the option of whole or partial nationalisation of the company, temporary or permanent, does not change the assessment of legality. The reason for that is that it is a question not of the ownership but of the cash needs of the company. Whether a business is owned in the public sector or the private sector, the test of commerciality has to be met for the Government to put cash in; that applies whichever sector it is in. That is the legal test on which this hinges.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The action taken so far is welcome, but this is still clearly a disturbing time for workers and suppliers. We heard earlier that British Steel invested £40 million in Ascoval—the Select Committee may want to look at that. At the same time, the French state and local government bodies invested an equivalent sum of £40 million in that steel mill. Is there anything the Government could learn from that? May I encourage the Secretary of State to be creative in the way he was suggesting he would be, by setting up a Brexit fund that could support businesses struggling as a result of Brexit?

Greg Clark: It is not a question of having the funds available; it is a question of the legality of being able to deploy them. The right hon. Gentleman will know, as
the House will, that I have a good record of being able to invest alongside private businesses where this secures jobs and innovation. That is absolutely something that I would do in the steel sector. One legal requirement—we are meeting the legal requirements—is to show that there is co-investment from a private investor. In the situation in France, there was substantial investment on both sides. The same was not available in this case, which was one reason why the advice that I was given was of the nature that it was.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We have been here on two or three occasions, including with GKN and Bombardier, so one wonders where we are going, as the steel industry is vital to manufacturing in this country and, more importantly, to the defence industry. I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, but I can tell him that I worked at Rolls-Royce when it collapsed in 1971 and there is no worse situation an employee can find themselves in; that situation went on for weeks, until eventually the Heath Government had to semi-nationalise it. I have the feeling that you may be back here in a couple of weeks’ time if you cannot find a buyer, so you will really have to consider that. I hope you will consider that, because if you do not, you will be inflicting a lot of pain on a lot of good employees who work very hard. Once you have experienced something like that, you never forget it.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious point, but I just gently observe that I will not find a buyer and I will not be giving any consideration to this matter whatsoever.

Greg Clark: I get the hon. Gentleman’s gist; I know what he requires. He is right to call attention to the fact that, notwithstanding the intentions that everyone in the House has expressed, today is a day that no one in Scunthorpe, in Skinningrove or on Teesside wanted to see. It is a very worrying day; people will go to bed tonight very concerned about their future. We cannot resolve this overnight, but we can resolve to do everything we practically can to make a good future possible. I am grateful for the support and commitments from across the House that we will all do precisely that.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State’s commitment to do all he can to prevent the demise of one of our great strategic industries? In the light of that, will he explain something to the House? In his statement, he said: “The Government have provided an indemnity to the official receiver, who is now responsible for the operations.”

Will he explain a little more about what that actually means, how long that will last and whether it will give the time for the official receiver to find another owner for the steelworks? Some clarity on that would be really helpful.

Greg Clark: If I am legally permitted, and I do not see why I should not be, I will put the letter of indemnity in the Library of the House. If I am not permitted to do so, I will find a way to share it, perhaps through the Select Committee. It reflects the fact that an industrial facility such as a steelworks is a hazardous environment, with a lot of risk. Given that the official receiver is legally responsible for that site, he should be fully indemnified. So the indemnities arise, for example, through liabilities that might arise from carrying out the proper performance of his duties as liquidator in maintaining, securing and funding the ongoing operation of the company’s undertakings and distributing its assets. So it is the work that the official receiver is engaged in that has the backing of this indemnity from the Treasury from the outset—from this morning, when the letter was sent.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is clear from the Secretary of State’s statement that he cares deeply about the issue, but may I take him back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on a sector deal? The Secretary of State talks about why the deal cannot take place, but may I put it to him that the industry clearly is suffering and is not cash-rich and that could be a good reason to implement the sector deal now and take that risk to ensure that we protect jobs and the industry in the future? If there are no other reasons why the deal could not take place, that would at least give us some assurances for the future.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman says. I am keen to have a sector deal in the steel industry. The nature of sector deals is the Government investing in certain capital improvements, research and development programmes or training programmes, and the industry investing alongside them. That is the essence of the deal. As is evident in the case of British Steel, it has not been possible for it to invest, which is why it has not been possible to conclude the deal. Given that, he makes a reasonable point: perhaps separately from the sector deal, other things could be done for a sector that is going through what is evidently a challenging time, not just here but around the world.
Unauthorised Encampments

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.19 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it a criminal offence to demand money to vacate an unauthorised encampment; and for connected purposes.

The relationship between the Traveller community and the resident community is one of the most tense of any in our society. As Members of Parliament, we are often contacted to support those caught up in the unhappy collision between the two groups, and successive Governments have failed to bridge the gap. By the sheer weight of Members who have volunteered to be sponsors of this Bill, I know that I am not the only Member who has faced such issues in my constituency. Usually, getting other Members to be co-sponsors of a Bill is an arduous and time-consuming task that requires the calling in of favours—or at least a good deal of doleful pleading. In this case, I had secured the requisite 11 volunteers within a few minutes of emailing round my request for sponsors. Indeed, as many as 41 right hon. and hon. Members have expressed an interest in being supporters of the Bill.

The Bill would build on current legislation to make it a specific offence for people to demand money to vacate an authorised encampment, which has happened in my constituency on several occasions that I have been made aware of. It is worth saying that I entirely understand that the Traveller community faces a good deal of prejudice and discrimination. I also think it is lamentable that successive Governments, and perhaps this one in particular, have spoken the language of supporting Traveller communities while failing to take the requisite steps to ensure that there are an adequate number of legitimate sites. We in this place will make the job of our overstretched police forces a much easier one if we ensure that there are sufficient legitimate sites.

I have to confess that some may see my own contribution as a little two-faced: I am happy to call for more sites, but when the recent local plan for the borough of Chesterfield went out for consultation, I considered all six of the potential venues that the council identified for a Traveller site to be inappropriate. I do recognise that if we wait for a resident community that positively demands a site, we will be waiting a long time, but the planning guidance needs looking at, because all the sites identified in Chesterfield were on council estates in built-up communities and were clearly inappropriate and would lead to greater division and unrest in the community. Surely other sites that are more remote from other housing estates would make more sense than these collisions being inflicted on a specific estate and community.

Having said all that, it is perfectly possible to have every sympathy about the lack of authorised encampments and still be horrified by some of the practices that we have all experienced in respect of unauthorised encampments. In particular, it is clear that, far from simply requiring a place to stay for a few days, many Travellers have seen the disquiet that their visit causes as an opportunity to use fear to earn and, indeed, to demand money. A number of different pieces of legislation already address the issue of trespass and encampments, but my Bill will deal with the specific offence of demanding money to leave a site that people are not entitled to be on in the first place.

Three weeks ago, I was contacted by an information technology firm in my constituency called Coolspirit, which is based on the Bridge business park in Dunston in Chesterfield. Coolspirit employs more than 20 people and had been notified that Travellers had moved on to its car park at 7 pm that night. The owner, Damon Robertson, attended and attempted to encourage the Travellers to leave. He explained that their use of his car park would prevent his staff from attending work the following day. Immediately, the Travellers suggested that he pay them £2,500 to leave the site, alongside making threats to him, his wife and his property. They also informed him that it would cost him a lot more than that to employ bailiffs to remove them from the site. To his amazement, the police officer who eventually attended seemed to think that this was an offer worthy of consideration.

Coolspirit was not alone in feeling utterly abandoned by the forces of law and order and as though the law was kinder to those who were breaking the law than those who were attempting to uphold their legal rights. Eventually, after my intervention, the police took a more helpful approach. It is only fair to acknowledge that the Derbyshire police and crime commissioner, Hardyal Dhindsa, has taken a very proactive approach in attempting to get these offences policed more robustly. Too often, though, the experience of businesses and landowners is that the victims are on the wrong side of the law.

The incident I have outlined was not the first time that the strategy of using an illegal encampment to extort money had been used in Chesterfield. Last August, Travellers arrived on the cricket square at the famous Queen’s Park cricket ground in Chesterfield on a Friday night, just an hour before a junior cup cricket final was due to start. Dozens of parents and supporters, plus the 22 children who were due to play in the cup final, arrived only to discover that play was impossible because of a caravan sited on a good length just outside the off stump, with further vehicles pitched up at gullly, square leg and extra cover.

The chairman of the cricket club approached the Travellers and asked them if they would mind moving 60 yards or so on to the bank—there is large amount of park land just beyond the cricket pitch at Queen’s Park—so that the children’s cup final could take place. He explained that the children had worked hard to get to the cup final and that their parents were all excited about watching them play. Again, he was told that the Travellers would be willing to move 60 yards on to the bank, but that the inconvenience would not come cheap: they would require £10,000 and the return ferry fares to Ireland to move.

In doing research for the introduction of my Bill, I learned of the case of Thwaites brewery in Blackburn. An even bigger group of 20 caravans arrived on site, ultimately costing about £350,000 in damage and stolen goods. Again, the Travellers made financial demands, in this case asking for £20,000 to leave the site. The police’s first question to the brewery owners was, “Are you insured?” Let us stop for a moment and ask, as legislators, what kind of law and service we are presiding over when
the first question that the police ask a victim of crime is not, “Is an offence being committed?” but, “Are you insured?”

In that case, the police eventually—and uniquely, as far as I have been able to establish—prosecuted the Travellers for the offence of blackmail alongside the criminal damage prosecution, although the chief executive of Thwaites brewery, Richard Bailey, told me that he believes the blackmail prosecution was sought only as an addendum to the criminal damage case. When I asked the Government how many blackmail prosecutions there have been for the offence of demanding money to leave a site that someone is on unlawfully, they confirmed that they did not hold that data. My diligent staff have worked night and day to try to find other examples of convictions for that offence under existing legislation, and they have been unable to find any.

It is not enough for us in this place to allow public authorities, whether the police or councils, to expect private landowners to pay thousands of pounds to regain unfettered access to their own land because of the failure of public authorities to provide adequate authorised facilities and our failure as legislators to provide usable legislation and policing resources to support landowners to rid their sites of illegal occupants. The Bill will not address all the issues, but it will at least provide usable legislation and policing resources to support landowners to rid their sites of illegal occupants.

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The Bill will not address all the issues, but it will at least provide usable legislation and policing resources to support landowners to rid their sites of illegal occupants.

This issue is causing a huge deal of distress, fear and mistrust, and it stands with us as MPs to tackle these issues, at a time when Parliament is passing precious little other legislation. The Bill enjoys cross-party support, and I know it will be popular not just among Members from all parties but, more importantly, among business owners and families across the land. I encourage the Government to find time in their schedule to support the later stages of the Bill.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Ordered,

That Toby Perkins, Vernon Coaker, Sir Roger Gale, Nigel Mills, Philip Davies, Matt Western, Stephen Pound, Bob Stewart, Ian Austin, Albert Owen, Mr Jonathan Lord and Sir David Amess present the Bill.

Toby Perkins accordingly presented the Bill.

**Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 393).**

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### Business without Debate

**SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL (4 JUNE)**

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No.10(2)(b), the sittings in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 4 June shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—(Mike Freer.)

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### PETITIONS

#### School Funding

**3.31 pm**

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** I present a petition that has been signed by just under 1,000 residents of Henley-on-Thames in Oxfordshire and friends of the schools in the Henley area to try to remove, once and for all, issues over school funding.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire and of friends of the schools in the Henley area,

Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the Basic Entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the National Funding Formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

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**Funding for Russell Hall Primary School**

**3.33 pm**

**Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** I rise to present a petition on behalf of teachers and staff at Russell Hall Primary School in Queensbury in my constituency. This petition has been signed by every single teacher and every member of support staff at the school, who are extremely concerned that this Government’s cuts to school funding are having a detrimental impact on the school’s ability to provide pupils with a well-rounded education. I hope that the Government will listen to the experts—the teachers, parents and children across the country—and stop these funding cuts.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Russell Hall Primary School has seen a decline in funding per pupil and a reduction in the lump sum allocated to the school by almost £65,000 in 2018/19 and by the same in 2019/20; further that the school is facing a significant deficit budget and is having to make staff redundancies to save money, including the reduction of vital frontline teaching staff, the restructure of support staff roles and the end of additional services currently available to children such as the Early Bird Club.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to increase per pupil funding and reverse the cuts made to school budgets.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Farming Community: Suicide

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

3.34 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to bring this debate to the Chamber today on what is a very difficult subject that clearly needs to be raised publicly so that the causes can be dealt with and the issue erased.

My lovely constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire has recently been rocked by a small number of suicides within our rural community. Small in number they may be, but they have had a massively disturbing effect on the families of the bereaved and on the communities that surround them. The farming community, not just in my constituency but right across the country, is tight knit, hard working and supportive of one another. We all know that farming can be a lonely occupation, that the working area is often remote and that isolated working is clearly the norm and certainly not the exception.

Regrettably, when looking at the figures of the National Farmers Union, I found that suicide among farmers is one of the highest of any occupation. It is male-dominated, especially for those under the age of 40. Statistics prove this, but, sadly, every statistic is not just a number but a human being and suicide has devastating effects on a family, a community and an industry. Such a loss has an effect not just immediately but for years, if not decades, after.

Last week in this place we acknowledged Mental Health Awareness Week. Well, it is about time. It is about time we talked about mental health and the pressures it brings to bear. For far too long, we, as a country, have been fully aware and prepared to talk publicly about physical health, but until the past few years we have looked on mental health as one of those taboo subjects.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is making an excellent point about mental health. What can we do? Let me explain why I ask that question. I am very worried about a farmer in my constituency, which is as rural as my hon. Friend’s. His cattle have been infected with TB by badgers, making him feel very unsure about where his future lies.

My view is that his farmer is certainly not alone. If my hon. Friend sticks with me through my speech, I am very worried about a farmer in my constituency, which is as rural as my hon. Friend’s. I am very worried about a farmer in my constituency, which is as rural as my hon. Friend’s. I am very worried about a farmer in my constituency, which is as rural as my hon. Friend’s.

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Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising such a good point. Clearly, this issue is shared right across the country, including in his constituency and in mine. I will bring forward many points in my speech, which I hope the Minister will pick up on. This matter is the subject of television programmes and it is often talked about outside this place, but this House needs to be talking about it as well and Ministers and MPs need to be doing something about it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter before the House? I spoke to him before this debate and reminded him of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions the week before last when I asked the Minister about suicides in the farming community. I represent Strangford, which is a rural constituency with large towns in the middle. I am aware of the suicides among the farming community and the pressures—financial pressures and family pressures—that bring on anxiety and depression. At DEFRA questions, I suggested to the Minister that there is the opportunity to have parish halls or community halls in rural communities available to address these issues as a one-stop shop where people can go to talk to someone about their anxiety and issues that concern them. There could be somewhere like this available in nearly every constituency. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that that might be a way forward?

Chris Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. That is certainly one of the remedies that we need to be looking at. I was here for DEFRA questions when he asked his question, and I was delighted that the Minister at the Dispatch Box gave a very positive reply. I can see that the whole of DEFRA is very keen to do something about this endemic problem.

For so long, as I said, mental health was a taboo subject, never to be mentioned and preferably whispered about or, better still, even to be swept under the carpet. Thank goodness we are all now talking about it. There are television programmes on it. We can get to the problem and get the remedies in place to ensure that not just the farming community but other communities around the country do not have to go through such tragic events.

We are very lucky that we have many organisations that one can turn to when requiring help. I recently had the good fortune to visit the local branch of the Samaritans, based in Llandrindod Wells. I met the manager, Mrs Alison Davies, who introduced me to an outstanding team of volunteers who work both on the telephones and in their associated charity shop. They do a superb job with call cover as an avenue for discussion. They provide someone to talk to, 24 hours a day and covering all communities, whether rural or urban, near or far.

I regularly attend events organised by Mrs Elaine Stephens and her team, who run the Brecon and Radnorshire branch of RABI—the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution. The organisation raises much-needed funds for farmers to call on when they have fallen on hard times and helps to alleviate financial pressures, where needed, easing the stress and worry.

Does he think that those farmers can access the services they need? Very often, they are very remote from a hospital.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising such a good point. Clearly, this issue is shared right across the country, including in his constituency and in mine. I will bring forward many points in my speech, which I hope the Minister will pick up on. This matter is the subject of television programmes and it is often talked about outside this place, but this House needs to be talking about it as well and Ministers and MPs need to be doing something about it.

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caused to those in the farming community. There is also the Farming Community Network, which does so much in Wales and across the United Kingdom, together with the Christian Centre for Rural Wales, based on the Royal Welsh showground.

I am very proud to mention the outstanding work that the young farmers clubs do. They carry out a tremendous amount of work for their communities.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I really do congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this debate to the House—it is of crucial importance. This does not apply just to rural seats such as his but also to mine, an urban seat surrounded by countryside—urban in rus. He mentioned the young farmers clubs. Does he agree that we need to double down in focusing on the mental health of young people, in particular, because so often we miss these problems, particularly now, in this 24-hour culture with all the social media, where they are particularly vulnerable?

Chris Davies: My hon. Friend raises an extremely good point. The young farmers clubs’ age group goes up to 26. As I said, the majority of suicides in the farming community are among those under 40. There is just a small gap between the very young and the boundaries up to 40 years of age. The young farmers clubs play a vital role. We have to be careful for and look after all ages.

After these tragic circumstances, young farmers club members from the Radnor, Brecknock and Montgomeryshire branches have taken it on their own backs to do the three highest peaks challenge in their counties for Mind and the DPJ Foundation. Mind, as everybody in the Chamber knows, is an excellent organisation that carries out outstanding work across the country.

The DPJ Foundation is a charity that has come to my attention only since my area has been rocked by recent events. It was set up in 2016 by Emma Picton-Jones from west Wales, whose husband Daniel, who was under 40, tragically took his own life and left Emma a young widow and mother of two small children. The foundation aims to support people from rural communities with poor mental health, especially men in the agriculture sector. It does an amazing job of providing swift agriculture-focused support, and the service is entirely funded by fundraising. I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating Emma on the amazing courage she has shown with her foundation and the youth in our community for taking such initiative through their young farmers clubs.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. This issue concerns us in North Devon, as a largely rural and farming community. Sadly, across Devon and the south-west, the number of suicides is higher than the national average. That is partly being tackled by the excellent work he describes. Does he agree that a lot of good work can also be done in the local community, by talking, listening and teaching people to recognise the signs of those who are crying out for help—particularly men, who are so bad at expressing it?

Chris Davies: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. His constituency is very similar to mine. The point I will hang my hat on is his final one. Men will not speak out about the fact that they have mental health issues and admit it to themselves or their families. The community around them are vital, with support from Government and charities.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me a second time. He has referred to young farmers clubs in his area. The Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster—our equivalent in Northern Ireland—are very active in providing social occasions and leisure activities, which are an outlet for the clear anxiety among farmers. They are very caring clubs and do great work. Young farmers clubs are very much the same in other parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his endorsement. Young farmers clubs are a beacon in our countryside and do so much good; I am sure the Minister will agree. Sadly, we have seen funding cut for young farmers from local authorities in our area—but, my goodness me, £1 spent on young farmers clubs is returned to the community tenfold, twentyfold or one hundredfold. I cannot praise young farmers clubs enough.

I mentioned the terrible circumstances of my asking for this debate. I have also mentioned some of the outstanding organisations and charities that do so much to help address these issues, but now I need to turn to the reasons that drive people to their lowest point and, ultimately, to take their own lives. The one fact that has clearly shone through in my knowledge and research is that there is no one issue or set of circumstances, and therefore there is no one answer. We have to tackle the causes from many different angles. Some of the causes, pressures and worries are small, but when layered and compounded, they become a huge problem for the individual.

I am sure many were surprised when I asked that a DEFRA Minister respond to the debate, rather than a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care. The reason for that is clear: we all know about the remedies and wonderful help available, but if we can take away the burden before it becomes too big, we will alleviate the need for support at that late stage—or, in some cases, when it is all too late.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is responding to the debate. He is not only a very capable Minister who has worked in several Departments during his distinguished career, but he is also a farmer. He lives within the farming community and was born into it. He understands at first hand the pressures on farmers, the isolation of the occupation and therefore the worries that, for some, can turn into an unbearable burden.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am exceedingly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As a Welsh MP, he will be aware of my constituency having many farmers right across it, as well as heavily deindustrialised areas, so farming is very much in line with the wider sector. We still have sheep sales every August, which bring all the community together and become a wider discussion about what is happening in the farming community. Something that comes across consistently and clearly is that people do not really understand the sector. When someone attends the local hospital in my constituency...
and says, “I’m having problems with x, y and z,” the person they see says, “Well, why are you having a problem? You’re a farmer. You’ve got plenty of money. You’ve got no problems. There are no particular challenges.”

Whenever I talk to younger farmers or owners who have been in the industry for 40 or 50 years, it comes across that people often do not understand the pressures facing the farming industry, the farmers working in it and their wives and children. They do not understand the expectation to be up at dawn and go to bed when the sun goes down, with a constant merry-go-round of pressure. They are running businesses, but most people do not think of farms as businesses, and they have all those same pressures. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a need to improve understanding about the very active and live pressures facing the industry?

**Chris Davies:** I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is great to see somebody on the Labour Benches having such an understanding of his rural community, so I thank him for that.

I have been touched by the many messages of thanks I received when news of this Adjournment debate was announced. It certainly shows that the people in our communities and our constituencies want this subject tackled. I was extremely touched to receive several letters and emails from farmers in my own constituency, who have been brave enough—yes, I say brave enough—to write to me to tell me of their concerns and experiences, and how some of them have come very close to the edge because of their worries.

Of course, I am not going to divulge who has contacted me, but I have taken a few extracts from five letters so that the House can hear of the worry directly from the farmer. The first is:

> “I started farming in 1979 and built the farm up to today where I am running 450 acres, 1200 breeding sheep and 70 cattle. We should have a comfortable lifestyle—but we do not! As long as there is food on the table and we can pay the bills, I am happy, but this is seldom the case.”

The second is:

> “I am dismayed at the way farmers are being put under more and more pressure by the increasing demands for futile records which accomplish no logical sense, either in the form of animal welfare, animal distress or traceability. The ever-increasing pressure of inspections and financial penalties from an industry that cannot take more...financial burdens”.

From a 20-year-old:

> “Paperwork has got out of control not only do I struggle to make ends meet but I am now taking on a third job—Where do we go when it all gets too much? Nowhere because we work 365 days a year”.

Another extract says:

> “Some may not know they have issues and don’t recognise the signs (as I did) and for some—for too many—

> “it’s been too late.”

Finally:

> “I used to spend one day a week walking—I found this very therapeutic. But I am unable to do this now owing to the pressure of work and all the deadlines of form filling and keeping record books up to date. At times during the last six months I have not wanted to live—The progression from this is to commit suicide.”

Those are powerful messages, as I am sure the whole House will agree, and those people are only a tiny fraction of those concerned in the industry.

Minister, I am afraid it is time to turn to your Department and to the agencies you have under your control. I would like to be clear that failures here are mirrored in devolved Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is not a witch hunt, but we would like to see the waving of a magic wand over some of your agencies and the bonfire of some of the layers of rules and regulations—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman means “his”—the Minister’s agencies and the Minister’s Department—rather than “your”, which would refer to the Chair. I am sure the hon. Gentleman means that, and I am just guiding him in the right direction.

**Chris Davies:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been told off in the most polite manner. I accept that fully of course and apologise.

Certainly, those outside would like the Minister to have a bonfire of some of the layers of rules and regulations. That would be a massive relief for so many people.

There are external factors as well. I am not going to spend time talking about the weather, which is always a great concern to farmers in both the uplands and the lowlands. It is of course only God Almighty that can make a difference there. Saying that, however, when extremes such as drought or heavy snow happen, Government support is a must and the guarantee of support in such extremes would lift a burden. I am not going to dwell on the fact that farmers have access to the means of committing suicide—guns, poisons and so on—because I do not want farmers to think that these means will be subject to further regulation or removal altogether, which would be an impossibility in agriculture, adding more stress to them. Such items are the tools of the trade in this occupation and they are necessities on their farms.

As I have mentioned, many of the problems that put pressure on our farmers are small, but when compounded with others and dwelt on over many long and lonely hours, they become huge. We are all aware of the volatile markets and the problems that low prices at livestock markets can cause, including difficulties with cash flow and profitability. The same can be said for arable prices and the difference that a good or bad harvest can make.

Cash flow is always a worry. There was a time when the local farmer who was awaiting a subsidy cheque or payment from the auctioneer could go into the local bank branch and ask for an immediate overdraft to see them through the difficult weeks or months until the payment arrived. Today, there are very few local bank branches. A decision on a bank extension can now take many weeks, and the decision is taken many miles away—sometimes hundreds of miles away—whereas the local bank manager used to know the farm, the farmer, their parents and their grandparents.

We have already heard that TB tests are a worry for farmers. Apart from not knowing whether they will be closed down if a reactor is found, there are also the financial and cash-flow pressures, together with seeing...
the cattle themselves being stressed by having to go through the tests. Yet we seem to be far away from eradicating the disease for good, and with little light at the end of the tunnel.

A TB test is just one of the inspections that farmers have to contend with. There are now many inspections from different agencies, and the rules and regulations that must be complied with appear immense: the checking from different agencies, and the rules and regulations have to contend with. There are now many inspections eradicating the disease for good, and with little light through the tests. Yet we seem to be far away from the cattle themselves being stressed by having to go through the tests. If we manage to stop one farmer from taking their own issue in this House in the Palace of Westminster our the issues that need to be addressed. If by raising this speech. The concerns will be familiar to him and so will totally understand the content of the debate and my safe.

If a farmer makes a mistake, there will be a fine, a retention or a financial burden of some kind. If an agency makes a mistake or a payment is delayed, no interest or compensation is paid for its mistake—often, there is not even a deadline for them to report back to the farmer. That could be deemed to be very one-sided indeed. We see endless and sometimes pointless regulation, introduced with little warning and no clear plan for how it will work or the impact it will have on the industry. A prime example is the removal of general licences in England in the last few weeks.

A point that has regularly been raised with me is the constant bashing that farmers have taken in the media and the onslaught they receive on social media, which take their worries to a whole new level. One day, eating meat is healthy for us; the next day, it will kill us. One week, livestock farming is the cause of climate change; the next week, it is the best way of saving the natural environment. There are so many mixed messages for a farmer to dwell on during those many hours alone doing their job. I have mentioned the constant form filling, which in recent years has moved online. That move online has been great, as long as one has broadband. Clearly, in areas such as mine and those of other Members, we have not seen joined-up thinking; the direction of travel has moved, but the preparations have not been made in the original broadband performance. That just adds extra stress for a farmer—another headache and another cause for concern.

I am sure that, having heard the points already raised, the Minister will not be surprised to know that, according to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, recent research by the Farm Safety Foundation found that 81% of farmers under 40 believe that mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing farmers today, and 92% believe that promoting good mental health is crucial if lives are to be saved and farmers kept safe.

I have already said that I know the Minister will totally understand the content of the debate and my speech. The concerns will be familiar to him and so will the issues that need to be addressed. If by raising this issue in this House in the Palace of Westminster our farmers’ calls are listened to and actions are taken, and if we manage to stop one farmer from taking their own life, our time here will have been well spent.
For the Minister’s benefit, it is worth considering how farmers find themselves in this acute situation. The financial pressures of farming are there for all to see. There may be a handful of people who get rich on farming, but there have never been any in my family and I do not think I have known many among those I represent or with whom I grew up. For the first time ever a couple of years ago, I was allowed to see the books of my family farm on Islay. I have long suspected that if my parents had just sold the land and put the money in the post office, they would probably have got a better return on it, but people farm because they have a commitment to agriculture and because, for them, it is a way of life. It is as much a vocation as an occupation.

The financial pressures are severe. The bureaucracy has grown like Topsy over the years. The penalties that are visited on farmers who are not able to fill in the right form at the right time or with the right information are wholly disproportionate to the administrative nature of those forms, but that never seems to change.

At the heart of it, I think that the biggest root cause is geographic isolation. That is because agriculture as an industry has changed enormously. Most farmers these days are one-man businesses. In a previous generation, there would have been a father, perhaps a son or two, farm workers and neighbours within easy reach, whereas now farms have been sold and amalgamated, so that geographically, people have become that much more isolated. Of course, that has a knock-on effect, because the network of neighbours around a farmer, which a generation ago would almost exclusively have been other farmers, will now include a much wider social mix. There will be people who have bought and moved into farmhouses on amalgamated farms. They will doubtless be good members of their community, but they do not share the same problems and pressures, so the isolation grows in that way.

Some of the changes that have contributed to the isolation are in themselves good. The fact that it is no longer socially acceptable to drink and drive has to be seen as a good thing, but it has meant the closure of an awful lot of pubs in rural areas. That was one place where there was a bit of social interaction, which would have gone some way to mitigating the isolation.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire spoke about the important role of young farmers clubs. I very much concur with that, but I think the average age of a farmer in Britain is now 59. Even in most young farmers clubs, that would stretch the definition of a young farmer. The growth in country areas of the Men’s Sheds movement—I have an excellent example of this in Orkney—is a good way in which men can get together and share some of their experiences in a safe environment, and should very much be encouraged. Without generalising, it has to be said that farmers are not good at talking about their mental health, so we should be particularly appreciative of those who are prepared to do it.

I place on record my admiration for Gary Mitchell, who, until earlier this year, was vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland. He stood down at the AGM in February, but at the time, he spoke about the way in which he had struggled with mental health problems as a consequence of taking on too much—it was all getting too much. In February, he wrote—it is worth reflecting on these words:

“Last summer was a very difficult time; trying to balance representing the union and keeping things afloat on my own dairy farm, my own mental health took a real downturn. My farm at home was in crisis and my work with the NFUS became an escape from everything else that was going wrong at home. I couldn’t face up to the problems and glossed over it all.”

Gary began to fill his head with doubts about whether he was good enough for the union and lost confidence in his ability to run the home farm. Eventually, he decided it was time to resign from the union, and he wrote further:

“After it was announced I was leaving, I remember farmers picking up the phone to give me their support. Farming can be a lonely business, so it is so important to have others there at these times”.

The kind of leadership he displayed in speaking like that, as somebody who had been an enormously effective representative of the farming community, helps to break down barriers and stigma that in other communities and parts of the country would already be considered quaint.

I would like to make one final point. Not everybody in the farming community is a farmer. As I said earlier, my wife is a practising veterinary surgeon. Vets have a suicide rate four times the national average, and for much the same reasons as farmers. They have the long hours, the isolation and the sheer physical exhaustion, especially in the springtime, when, as well as their routine 40 hours a week, they will be out, sometimes right through the night, doing calvings and lambings, before having to start again at 9 o’clock the next morning. They also have the extra burden of compassion fatigue. It is hellish for the farmer who has TB in his herd and has to see widespread exterminations, but for the vet who has to pass the actual death sentence, it is even worse.

There are 24,000 practising veterinary surgeons in Britain, and the VetLife helpline last year alone recorded 2,500 calls. That body of 24,000 practising veterinary surgeons generated 2,500 calls—obviously that is not to say 2,500 veterinary surgeons, but it is still quite a sobering statistic. As professionals in a rural community, they also have obligations of confidentiality, and their professional duty is towards their clients and the animals in their care. As I say, not everyone in the farming community is a farmer, and we should extend our consideration to those within our farming communities who suffer similar stresses.

I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this topic to the Floor of the House—I am delighted he has done so. I do not expect the Minister to wave a magic wand at the Dispatch Box, though I hold him in high regard. It is good that we are hearing from the Farming Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because the answer will be found across a whole panoply of Government services, and I hope that as the voice of rural communities in government, he will understand that he has a role to play in holding the ring while everybody else does their bit.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Would that I had a magic wand! I can think of a number of applications I could use it for at this present very difficult time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) for securing this important debate. Coming just after Mental Health Awareness Week,
it gives us a chance to consider this important issue affecting key communities across the country. Tragically, this is an issue that affected one member of my own wider family some years ago, and I extend my condolences to the three families from his constituency who he referred to in his opening remarks.

Irrespective of where farmers farm and what they produce, the farming community contributes a huge amount to this country, providing the best food, the highest standards of animal welfare, beautiful landscapes and healthy land and water. However, hard work, long hours, challenging conditions and volatile markets mean that there are often very real human costs to living in a farming community. Those communities are often remote—none more so than those in my hon. Friend’s constituency in mid-Wales, where farmers often place self-reliance over seeking support. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about the provision of services. Sadly, in many cases, farmers are reluctant to access those services, because of some sort of pride in them that means they do not want to seek help.

It is widely acknowledged that there is an increased risk of suicide among people working across a range of agricultural occupations, compared with the general population, and data from the Office for National Statistics demonstrates that. There are many factors influencing wellbeing in the farming community, but as a Minister and a farmer, I am committed to ensuring that, as we prepare for new agricultural policies in the future, we do what we can to reduce negative impacts and, where possible, improve health and wellbeing across the sector.

My officials were in Builth Wells, in my hon. Friend’s constituency, for a Farming Community Network event last November, and they heard first hand from volunteers about the pressures in farming. I note that the DPJ Foundation, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend, and which started in Pembrokeshire in tragic circumstances and aims to help people in agriculture who are struggling with mental health issues, started operating in Powys at the start of the year.

My hon. Friend mentioned the role of young farmers clubs. As a former chairman of the Amotherby young farmers club, I know what a great social network the clubs provide in the community. That was particularly true in my day, when there were no other social networks to rely on. I recall that we never got a penny from the council, although we raised thousands for local and national charities.

It is important that farmers are aware of the people and particularly the farming charities they can turn to if they are going through difficult times. The Farming Community Network, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution and the Addington Fund all do a brilliant job in supporting farmers and their families. The National Farmers Union also has a regional network of advisers who can provide support. The Rural Payments Agency works closely with farming help organisations to support the farming community in England. That includes having hardship arrangements in place for those farmers facing financial difficulties.

DEFRA works closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on this important issue. In 2016, NHS England published “The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, and in January, NHS England published the NHS long-term plan, which sets out a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with funding for mental health growing by at least £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24.

The national suicide prevention strategy for England has ensured that every local authority has a suicide prevention plan in place to implement tailored approaches to reducing suicides, based on the needs and demographics of local communities. In October 2018, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced our first Minister for suicide prevention. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who holds that responsibility, recently met the Farming Community Network to understand better what can be done to help. In January 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care published the first cross-Government suicide prevention work plan. DEFRA’s specific interest here is to understand the trends in rural communities and how best to undertake targeted action.

As we have heard, loneliness is a key contributor to poor mental health in rural communities. That is why the Government have committed £11 million to the building connections fund to help bring communities together. DEFRA also gives an annual grant of nearly £2 million to the Action with Communities in Rural England network to help keep rural communities vibrant, active and connected.

I would like to reflect briefly on DEFRA’s future responsibilities, which we take very seriously. The agricultural industry is about to go through the most significant change in over 40 years following our imminent—I hope—departure from the European Union and the common agricultural policy. Some stability is therefore important, and we have pledged that funding will remain unchanged until the end of this Parliament. We plan to phase out CAP payments gradually over a seven-year period from 2021 to 2027, which I hope gives sufficient assurance to everyone currently relying on those payments that change will not happen overnight.

Over the next 18 months, DEFRA will introduce new policies that will start to transform the domestic agricultural sector. DEFRA is committed to developing policies that support wellbeing, and it plans to work with partners to foster personal and business resilience as changes begin to happen. For instance, we are designing policies with those who will be affected by them wherever we can. We are also mindful of the capacity to adapt to change that farmers will have. DEFRA is currently feasibility testing proposals for future policies, taking into account farmers’ experiences. In designing the new agricultural policy, we are clearly focused on outcomes and all our key messages about policy changes will be accessible for those who most need to understand them and take action.

Those are just some of the ways that DEFRA is incorporating wellbeing into future agricultural policy, but we also recognise that we have to address long-standing pressures affecting livestock farmers. Bovine TB has been cited by the Farming Community Network as a factor in one in three of the 2,500 cases it deals with every year. It is a disease that we are determined to beat, even if that means taking tough and sometimes unpopular decisions. That is why our eradication programme has to balance the necessity of tough control measures with the need to safeguard the sustainability of affected farming businesses through information, advice, support and compensation.
The Government take our responsibility seriously to listen and understand what pressures farmers are under and what they need to ensure they can take care of their own physical and mental health and wellbeing. We are currently evaluating where direct support may be helpful to farmers to manage change. Personally, I welcome new initiatives such as Grow Yorkshire, where local partners have come together specifically to help the farming sector to prepare for change. Where Government can add value to positive initiatives that will support farmers to navigate the changes ahead, we will consider how best we can do just that, without imposing an inappropriate burden on the taxpayer.

I would like to reflect on a different aspect of mental health and wellbeing. We should not forget that there is an important opportunity for the farming and countryside stewardship sector to provide access to mental health support for the wider community. There are clear benefits in spending time in the natural environment: it can improve mental health and feelings of wellbeing; it can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression; and it can help boost immune systems as encouraging physical activity may reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

For the majority of people, the countryside can improve wellbeing, and nature plays a major role in facilitating good mental health. I am delighted that the Duchess of Cambridge is promoting this idea with a wonderful “back to nature” garden at the Chelsea flower show this week, which I had the privilege to see on Monday. However, it is important to remember that, although the countryside provides an essential gateway for other parts of society to benefit from our natural environment, those working in farming may not always share this improved wellbeing—particularly if the wind is driving the snow in from the west on a difficult lambing day. We are currently exploring projects that will connect people with nature for better mental health. These projects will help to implement our commitments in the 25-year environment plan.

Specific mention was made of the pressures being put on farmers by delayed payments and problems with some of the support systems in place. In Wales, the Welsh Government are responsible for the payment of the basic payment scheme. By 30 April, the Welsh Government had processed more than 98% of 2018 BPS claims, and in England by 30 April, the Rural Payments Agency had paid more than 99.5% of 2018 BPS claims, a significant improvement on previous years. Some 93.4% of 2018 BPS claims were made during December 2018, the best performance in the first years. Some 93.4% of 2018 BPS claims were made during December 2018, the best performance in the first years, and we are on track to complete 95% of ES 2017 final payments by the end of July.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of village halls, as he did at the last DEFRA questions. DEFRA fully recognises the value of these assets for a variety of activities, and we provide funding and support through ACRE. Many village halls are regularly used by young farmers organisations. Indeed, my own young farmers club used to meet in one of the village halls, and they are a critical source of emotional support and friendship. The Men’s Sheds Association provides a similar service for a slightly older category of countryside people, and I was privileged to visit the Men’s Shed just outside Whirby in my constituency.

We have heard a number of comments about charities doing good work, and I can absolutely assure the House that DEFRA is keen to support farmers in coping with change. We work closely with charities such as the Farming Community Network, the Farm Safety Foundation to raise awareness and support programmes that help farmers to take care of their mental and physical health. We welcome awareness campaigns such as Mind Your Head and the YellowWellies.org campaign.

At lunchtime today, I met some hill farmers from Lancashire, and they made the point that we have also heard in the debate about reducing the bureaucracy that farmers have to go through to access support. A number of suggestions were made, and I hope that we will be able to consider them. They included having a rolling application schedule for some of the countryside stewardship schemes, so that there are no longer deadlines in place, and possibly helping cash flow by having monthly rather than annual payments. I know the frustrations that many farmers feel when the rent is due but the payment has not come through. There have even been cases when farmers who have not received their cheques are at the sale ring trying to buy store cattle for the summer grazing season, and their neighbours who have received their cheques can bid for the cattle but they cannot. By the time they get their cheques, the market has sometimes moved on.

Outside the European Union, we will be able to design and implement our own new user-friendly schemes. I was touched by the testimony in the constituents’ letters quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, and one comment that struck me was that the paperwork was now out of control.

Mr Robert Goodwill

[MR ROBERT GOODWILL]

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We need to bring it back under control, and I believe that, without the European Commission calling the tune, we will be in a better position to design our own schemes.

In conclusion, my Department takes farmers’ and agricultural workers’ wellbeing very seriously. I am aware that rates of suicide are higher across the agricultural sector than in the general population. People working in the agricultural industries often have a solitary lifestyle. It is hard work, and their businesses are subject to unpredictable factors such as the weather. Indeed, it is usually either too wet or too dry. As we design our future agricultural policy, we are looking at the impact of new policies on wellbeing, and we are also working with partners to foster personal and business resilience. Together with other parts of the Government such as the Department of Health and Social Care, I am committed to finding and implementing the best solutions to reverse this worrying trend and provide help where and when it is most needed to save lives.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.28 pm

*House adjourned.*
Jeremy Wright: In order to be even-handed, I should offer equal thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend for the work that he does with the APPG. He is right that horse-racing can make a significant contribution—not just to our sporting life, but to our broader community life. It is important that young people understand the sport and understand horses, and we welcome any opportunity that the industry has to support that.

Margot James: I congratulate everyone behind Young At Heart in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency—a group of women who are, in the main, over the age of 80. One of their biggest complaints is being unable to make face-to-face appointments to see their doctor, and they also have complaints about the telephone services at doctors’ surgeries. What more support could the Minister provide to allow GPs to have funding to teach and upskill those women to be able to use those services?

Margot James: I congratulate the South East LEP on gaining this initiative. We have now launched six local digital skills partnerships, and they will match provision to the very local needs of people, particularly in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Chris Elmore: I hold regular discussions about digital inclusion with a group called Young At Heart in Cefn Cribwr in my constituency—a group of women who are, in the main, over the age of 80. One of their biggest complaints is being unable to make face-to-face appointments to see their doctor, and they also have complaints about the telephone services at doctors’ surgeries. What more support could the Minister provide to allow GPs to have funding to teach and upskill those women to be able to use those services?

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TV Licences for Over-75s

3. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the maintenance of free television licences for the over-75s.

Jeremy Wright: First, let me mostly endorse what the hon. Lady said about the women’s World cup and wish a huge amount of luck to England and almost as much luck to Scotland.

I disagree with the hon. Lady’s description of the position. We do not accept the characterisation in the report that she refers to. In relation to TV licences, as she has heard me say this morning, I think it is important to wait until we see the BBC’s proposals, and we will then be in a position to comment. That principle applies more broadly—it is always sensible to wait and see what is proposed before you decide you do not like it.

Gambling-related Harm

4. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to ensure adequate funding for (a) education, (b) research, (c) treatment and (d) support to minimise gambling-related harm.

Mims Davies: GambleAware was fully funded last year. As the hon. Gentleman said, it almost reached the £10 million target, and another £7 million was brought in through financial penalties. We expect targets to be increased in the future and welcome commitments by operators to substantially increase the amounts they give. However, as I said at the Gambling Commission strategy launch, if the voluntary system cannot meet current or, more importantly, future needs, we will look at alternatives. Everything is on the table, including a mandatory levy.
they experience the fans have. In particular, on the size of football shirts, children may be a young adult size, and that should be looked at appropriately.

As I say, if this voluntary system does not work, everything is on the table. However, I would say that of those people who come into contact with GambleAware, 70% come through a life-changing experience and get on to a better future, and I would advise anyone experiencing harm to contact it.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon—not here.

Hon. Members: Oh!

Leaving the EU: Performing Arts

6. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the performing arts of the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Speaker: I called Mr Neill, but I am not sure that he is here.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): We have consulted widely with a diverse range of stakeholders from across the performing arts to ensure the potential impacts of Brexit are understood and to ensure that future opportunities can be realised. We are pursuing a wide-ranging agreement with the EU on culture that will ensure all parties can continue to benefit from international collaboration.

Robert Neill: As my hon. Friend the Minister will know, the UK has the most vibrant performing arts sector in the whole of Europe. An important part of that is the ability of UK companies to work collaboratively with European companies and for UK artists to visit and tour venues in the EU and vice versa. However, to achieve that, will he tell us what specific steps are being taken to ensure that there is frictionless travel for performing artists and musicians, as well as their equipment, including musical instruments?

Michael Ellis: DCMS is engaging extensively with the performing arts sector. My hon. Friend is right about the importance of the sector to our culture, but also to our economy. For example, more people go to the theatre than go to football matches in this country. I did have a meeting with UK theatres and the Home Office; we set up that meeting to give them the opportunity to express their concerns. We are working very closely with the Home Office and others on that. I very much recognise the importance of touring for the cultural sector, and we will work on that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have a personal interest in that my daughter is a poet and playwright, and my son is an actor and scriptwriter. They thought they were being brought up as citizens of Europe, and they are deeply worried about the future in relation to artists coming here and their ability to tour across in Europe. This is a sad, sad day for Europe.

Michael Ellis: The reality is that our UK theatre and performing arts community is an excellent example of how we work collaboratively throughout the country and around the world, and that is going to continue even after Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The multi-talented character of the Sheerman family is, frankly, not a surprise to the House.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The chief executive of the Edinburgh fringe has expressed serious concern about the cost and complexity of artists coming to Edinburgh, and fears they will go elsewhere. Does the Minister really believe that losing access to Creative Europe funding, ending freedom of movement and pulling up the drawbridge will culturally enrich the people of these islands?

Michael Ellis: We are not pulling up any drawbridges. The political declaration agreed between the UK and the EU specifically acknowledges the importance of mobility for cultural co-operation. Indeed, the Government have announced plans to negotiate reciprocal mobility arrangements with the EU, which will support businesses to provide services and to move their talented people.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I recommend to the Minister the RSC production of “As You Like It” that my brother is appearing in at Stratford-on-Avon?

As part of the preparations for leaving the EU, the EU has indicated that there will be an opportunity for reciprocal agreement for up to 90 days in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Given the importance of the EU for our performing artists, and for our world-leading musicians as well, can the Minister give us the strongest possible indication that the Government will honour that reciprocal deal with the EU—whoever ends up in charge?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s brother is a magnificent performer, but I hope he will forgive me if I add that my daughter, Jemima, will be performing in “As You Like It” at her primary school in a matter of days, and it is a key priority for me to observe her at work.

Michael Ellis: There are clearly several performers in the family, Mr Speaker.

In answer to the question, we are working very hard, and I am extremely confident that the UK theatre and performing arts community will continue to perform as excellently as it has been doing. Our performers and theatre are world-renowned, and that will continue after Brexit.

Mr Speaker: I asked for that.

Society Lottery Reform

7. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he plans to take in response to the consultation on society lottery reform.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): As outlined in the consultation, we are considering changes to the sales and prize limits for society lotteries. The regulatory framework for lotteries must be appropriate, and both society lotteries and the national lottery should be able to thrive. We hope to respond to the consultation by the summer recess.

Tommy Sheppard: In February last year I wrote on behalf of the People’s Postcode Lottery to ask for the limit on charity lottery sales to be raised to £100 million. On 7 February I was told that the Department was
“considering” that proposal. There have been 15 months of consideration and deliberation, so is it not now “make your mind up time”? Many of those charity lotteries are trying to fill the gaps left by the Government’s austerity policies, and it seems unfair to continue to hold them back. When the Minister announces the response to the consultation, will he commit to raising that limit in line with inflation?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I will not announce the result of the consultation until we have that result. We have been saying for some time that we would seek to do that by the summer, and that is what we will do. It is important to consider carefully the balance of arguments. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that society lotteries make a considerable contribution, but he will understand that I also have a responsibility to protect the interests of the national lottery. Getting that balance right is not straightforward, and we seek to do it so that a contribution to the life of this country will continue to be made by both society lotteries and the national lottery.

Heritage: Cultural Importance

8. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What assessment has he made of the cultural importance of heritage to towns and cities throughout the UK. [911073]

9. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the cultural importance of heritage to towns and cities throughout the UK. [911074]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): As set out in the Government’s heritage statement, heritage is an essential part of our cultural economy, our cultural landscape and our country. Our heritage is globally renowned and world leading. The importance of heritage to towns and cities includes the creation of a better place to live in, work in, and visit.

Peter Aldous: Heritage will be a vital component part of town centres as they reinvent themselves, and the high street area in Lowestoft is now a heritage action zone. What steps are being taken to ensure that such good initiatives are nationally co-ordinated, so that we best promote the UK as a world heritage visitor destination?

Michael Ellis: The Government’s comprehensive plans for high streets are a nationally co-ordinated initiative that will help high streets to adapt, and promote our heritage. Some £42 million of funding from the Government and Historic England will create dozens of high street heritage action zones, including Lowestoft, and £3 million will come from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and £15 million from the Architectural Heritage Fund to support social enterprise. Lots of money is going to heritage, as it should do.

Victoria Prentis: As it says in “As You Like It”: “Time travels in diverse paces with diverse persons.”

Our cultural heritage is important. Banbury has a long cultural heritage, and I am delighted that the Government have pledged more than £60 million for the heritage high streets fund. How will we use local heritage to benefit our towns and cities?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady really is an impressive culture vulture.

Michael Ellis: The heritage high street fund will restore and adapt our high streets, drive consumer footfall, increase further investment, and generate greater pride in our high streets. By reviving older buildings that are in a state of neglect, we will ensure that high streets remain at the heart of our communities for years to come. That will help to bring about the regeneration of high streets and the communities they serve, including in my hon. Friend’s wonderful constituency of Banbury.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The stunning FOCUS Wales music festival highlighted the importance of music worldwide when it brought artists from across the globe to Wrexham for three days last week. It used our magnificent St Giles’ parish church, which is the resting place of Elihu Yale, who founded Yale College, and a superb venue. May I extend an invitation to the entire Front-Bench team to come next year and see what a superb venue Wrexham is?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is very kind to issue such a generous invitation. I commend him for his support for his constituency and for that important event. The Government announced almost £500 million of funding between 2016 and 2020 for a diverse portfolio of music and arts education programmes. The rewards from that include support for the festival in Wrexham.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A big part of Newport’s heritage is the Chartist Rising, which happened 180 years ago this November. In Newport, we commemorate it every year. What more can we do in this place and nationally to recognise the Chartist movement’s critical role in shaping our democracy?

Michael Ellis: Historic events such as the Chartist Rising, and many others in communities around the country, are a part of what makes this country’s rich cultural tapestry so endearing and so rewarding to our society. I commend the hon. Lady for her support for that event. She will no doubt take many opportunities to continue to remind Members of it and attract attention that could indeed bring tourist footfall to the area.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Cleethorpes currently benefits from coastal communities funding to improve its many Victorian and Edwardian buildings. Will the Minister give an assurance that the Department’s various funding streams will continue to benefit our coastal communities?

Michael Ellis: We are certainly looking very carefully at our coastal communities, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want to support them. They bring in tourist visitors, but we want to see their number increased. We will definitely take the point he makes under advisement.

Commercial Radio: Wales

10. Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Wales on the regulation of commercial radio in Wales. [911075]
The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We continue to support the growth of radio services in Wales. A number of new community and digital stations have launched in recent years, including those offering programmes in the Welsh language. The BBC has also improved its Radio Wales FM coverage and last year it launched BBC Radio Cymru 2.

Ben Lake: I thank the Minister for that answer. She alludes to Wales as a proud bilingual nation. At present, Ofcom has no power to introduce safeguards in relation to the provision of Welsh language content when awarding licences. Given that existing localness requirements may be weakened as radio transfers to DAB, does the Minister not agree that the regulator should now be empowered to ensure the Welsh language is not abandoned in the process?

Margot James: We are very committed to programmes in minority languages. We have launched a new audio content fund and we expect 5% of that fund to be devoted to Welsh and Gaelic programming. I urge the hon. Gentleman to be cautious about mandating programmes in minority languages, because we have to balance that with overall choice. He needs to bear in mind that with the Radio Ceredigion application, which I know he supported, Nation Radio was the only applicant to replace it. By stipulating more and more regulations, we might reduce overall choice.

Works of Art: Retention in the UK

11. Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What advice his Department provides to institutions seeking to retain pre-eminent works of art in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): My Department, in partnership with Arts Council England, delivers and advises on various statutory schemes that are designed to keep items of particular cultural significance in the UK, such as the judge’s copy of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” from the obscenity trial in 1960. The statutory schemes include various tax incentives to assist UK public institutions in acquiring pre-eminent items.

Sir Hugo Swire: Seeing as we are all in the business of burnishing our thespian credentials this morning, may I refer back to the time at my little-known secondary school when I was a very convincing Badger in “Toad of Toad Hall”? It was somewhat safer to be a badger in those days.

Will the Minister ensure that in the event of a foreign purchaser refusing a matching offer, an absolute ban on future export can be enforced by compelling him or her to keep the item on display in a recognised public institution and pay any insurance, rather than expecting Government indemnity?

Mr Speaker: Might there be photographic evidence of the right hon. Gentleman’s performance that could be made available to Members of the House?

Michael Ellis: Well, in school I played Sir Roderic Murgatroyd from Gilbert and Sullivan. I felt that I had to mention that.

The Government are currently considering the results of a consultation on strengthening the process for retaining national treasures. When an owner or foreign purchaser wishes to export a national treasure and does not accept the matching offer from a public body that has taken the trouble to raise the funds to purchase it, that will be taken into account when making a decision on the export licence application and a licence will normally be refused. However, the owner is not currently compelled to display the item. We are looking at that in greater detail at the moment through the consultation.

Public Libraries

12. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he has taken to protect access to public libraries.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. My Department monitors proposed changes to library service provisions by local authorities, and if DCMS receives a complaint that a council may be failing to meet its statutory duty, we challenge those councils and carefully consider the evidence before deciding if a local inquiry is needed.

Dr Huq: The Manic Street Preachers said “Libraries gave us power”, but since 2010, 230,000 library opening hours have been lost and 127 libraries in England have completely shut their doors. I have three under threat in my constituency. I listened to the Minister’s answer. What advice or assistance can he give Ealing Council, which is struggling to keep its statutory services going with a 64% cut from the Government, to keep these engines of social mobility alive?

Michael Ellis: I would ask Ealing Council, as with other councils, to look at local authorities that are investing in libraries. Local authorities around the country of every political hue are opening, expanding and developing libraries. The first reaction to those facing budgetary challenges ought not to be to cut cultural items, but to provide support for them, and other local authorities have proven that they can do it.

Topical Questions

T1. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I congratulate the four English football teams, one of whom I know you take a particular interest in, Mr Speaker, who have qualified for the European finals. It is the first time that one nation has ever provided all the major European finalists in a single season. We have seen success elsewhere in my Department’s portfolio, too, with the Tech Nation report showing that our digital economy is leading the way in Europe, with 35% of Europe and Israel’s tech unicorns being created here in the UK. We have the cricket world cup to look forward to, with the opening match at the Oval next week. I am sure the House will join me in welcoming the nine visiting teams and in wishing our
cricketers the very best of luck. Perhaps I also ought to congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, on climbing Snowdon, which he recently achieved. All of us in the House are used to uphill struggles; I am pleased that he has completed that one successfully.

Bim Afolami: The access to cash review recently published a report setting out that 17% of the adult population—about 8 million adults—would struggle to manage in a cashless society, with the majority of those people in rural areas. Will the Minister explain what the Department is doing to improve the situation for those in rural areas to bring the standard up to that in more urban areas?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right that we face two challenges: one is skills and the other is access to broadband. On broadband, he will know that we have succeeded in achieving our initial objective of 95% of the country being covered by superfast broadband, and in fact, exceeding that somewhat, but we now need to move on to rolling out full fibre. When we do that, it is important that we focus on those areas that the market will not reach unaided—an outside-in approach, as we have described it. I believe that will benefit rural areas predominantly.

Mr Speaker: The notable athlete himself: Mr Tom Watson.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good morning, Mr Speaker, and my very best wishes to Jamieson and all colleagues’ family members in their thespian endeavours, including my daughter, Saoirse, who has just successfully auditioned to play Nancy in the school production of “Oliver Twist”.

UEFA’s inclusion and diversity policy says the following: “Everyone has the right to enjoy football, no matter who you are, where you’re from or how you play.” But next week, Henrikh Mkhitaryan will miss the match of a lifetime because he is from Armenia, and Arsenal fans with Armenian names are being denied visas to travel to Baku. This is a scandal. It is a deeply ugly side to the beautiful game, and if I was Secretary of State, I would make it clear to UEFA that it is completely unacceptable. Will the Minister demand that UEFA ensures that countries that force players to choose between their sport and their safety and that discriminate against travelling fans will never be allowed to host future events?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right: if football is to be for everyone, and we all believe that it should be, that should apply to football in our own country and to football in places where we want our fans to be able to travel. It is important that we engage with Uefa, as we have been doing, to send the very clear message that places where football travels to should be welcoming to those who support football, and politics should have nothing whatsoever to do with it.

There is, as the hon. Gentleman says, the related challenge of whether British fans who are of Armenian descent are able to have a visa to travel to Azerbaijan. That is something that my colleagues in the Foreign Office are picking up, because it is important that all those who want to travel to support their team should be able to do so. If they cannot, football is not achieving what it should.

Mr Speaker: Quite right.

Tom Watson: A woeful ticket allocation means that the vast majority of fans will not travel to that match or, indeed, to the Champions League final, because Uefa has favoured corporates over fans. Will the Secretary of State condemn Uefa with me today? On this day when the House is divided over Europe, can we unite to condemn Uefa for its disgraceful treatment of football fans?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right that there are not enough tickets available for fans, either on Saturday or next week in Azerbaijan. I think we can agree that as many people who are passionate about their team as possible should have the chance to see them succeed and compete on the European stage, just as they can on the national stage. We believe that it is important to say to Uefa that that is a message we all support. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising it, so that we can communicate that message with clarity.

It is important that we spread the benefits of the major European competitions around Europe. I do not believe it is right that they should be held in only a small subset of European countries. There are huge economic and sporting benefits to be derived from them, and countries should have access to those benefits, but only if they are prepared to give access to passionate football supporters.

T2. [911082] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I add my best wishes to the England women’s team for success in the forthcoming World cup. Will the Minister give them the best possible send-off by ensuring that the Government commit increased funding to football facilities at grassroots level?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the exciting summer of women’s sport that is coming up, which will include the Ashes and the Solheim cup. Today, the netball squad is being announced for Liverpool. It is a very exciting time for sport across our nation and many people will be coming to our shores to enjoy it. I will be sending off the women’s team, because I will see them at Brighton and Hove before they go on their final warm-up. It is absolutely right that we prioritise grassroots opportunities for everyone to enjoy.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Next month, Uefa will start the process of recruiting 12,000 volunteers from host countries, including Scotland and England, for Euro 2020. They will be expected to give a huge time commitment and to work for free in complex roles that involve huge responsibility, including anti-doping. Is that not just exploitation dressed up as an opportunity, and will the Secretary of State raise it with Uefa directly?

Mims Davies: I feel we have a number of conversations to have with Uefa and I am happy to add that to the list. As we approach the Commonwealth games in Birmingham in 2022—10 years on from London 2012, where people derived incredible experiences from volunteering—I think we should support this. However, if there are challenges in recruiting people due to their responsibilities, we must look at that.

T3. [911084] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): For what it’s worth, I recently appeared in panto as Sir Lancingalot in the North Lancing residents
association’s version of “Robin Hood”. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh no you didn’t!” Oh yes I did! Also in Lancing, I am attempting to arrange a programme of midnight football over the summer, which I did a few years ago in another part of my constituency that is affected by antisocial behaviour. With the help of Adur Athletic football club, the local police and the local council, we laid on football between 10 and midnight on Saturday evenings for teenagers who otherwise, as they admitted themselves, would be getting up to no good on the streets. It completely changed the dynamics between those kids and the police, who came and joined in enthusiastically. Does the Minister agree that that is a constructive way of dealing with antisocial behaviour, getting kids engaged in sport, and engaging those kids with the police and other local people in a positive way?

Mims Davies: I am very pleased that I can mention that my daughter, Jemimah, is going to be a barnacle in her next production. [Laughter.] She is going to be really unhappy about my saying that. [Interjection.] She’ll stick at it.

On the broader point, as we approach a really important time for our young people in terms of bringing forward the youth charter for our next generation, we absolutely have to think about the positive activities, engagement and participation of our young people. On my patch, we have Friday night football, which gets people off the streets and gives them the chance to have free wi-fi and some toast afterwards, and to enjoy being part of the community. We need to make sure that there is that participation, at any time of the day or night. As Sports Minister, that is what I like to hear.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, Wolverhampton Wanderers became the latest football club to commit to rail seating at its stadium. Football fans want safe standing, clubs do, and the governing bodies are on board as well. It has been eight months since the Government announced their consultation and a review of this. When will it come to a close?

Mims Davies: The Secretary of State and I have had the results of a review come to us that we are considering very carefully. In this Chamber over a number of months, it has been very clear that fans and MPs alike want to know what the next stages are. We are considering the review appropriately and will be coming forward with the next steps.

T4. [911086] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): If we are talking about our acting accolades, Mr Speaker, mine was winning a national best actress award with the Young Farmers—a strange dichotomy, but true.

Yesterday, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee went to the Chelsea Flower Show and carried out an inquiry into the value of garden tourism to the nation—it is already some £4 billion. Does the Minister agree that if we put garden tourism in the tourism sector deal, we could double this money, at least, and benefit the economy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Indeed. Garden tourism contributed billions of pounds to national GDP in 2017. The proposed sector deal has been in negotiation for some time now. There has been wide consultation with the sector, and it has come forward with a list of proposals for key areas to target within the industry. My hon. Friend is right to focus on the value of our garden tourism. At Alnwick castle, for example, and elsewhere, there are very special gardens for people to visit. I would be happy to hear of any further proposals from her afterwards.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. Will he meet me to discuss the future of the Priory museum in Coventry? In that area, under Henry VIII, the old church was destroyed. The Parliament of Devils was held there.

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for supporting Coventry city of culture 2021, which is a very exciting project. I would very happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

T5. [911087] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The video games industry is a beacon of success in the British economy. It is particularly strong in the west midlands, especially around the so-called Silicon Spa area of Warwickshire. What is the Department doing to support this industry—in particular, to provide it with people with the right skills to enable it to grow?

Jeremy Wright: As my hon. Friend would expect, I am very proud of Silicon Spa in the area of Warwickshire that I represent. I visited one of the games-designing companies very recently. I accept that having one’s picture taken under a big sign saying “Rebellion” is not a sensible thing to do at the moment. None the less, I thought it was important that I made that visit, and I was impressed by what I saw. My hon. Friend is right that it is important that we give these companies people with the skills that they require to continue to be successful. He will know about our creative careers programme, which gives 160,000 children an opportunity to learn about careers in video games and elsewhere.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very proud that I supported the millennium dome, which became the O2 and is a great success. The other night, I heard Elbow play there. Will the Secretary of State help me get a performing arts centre of international quality in Huddersfield—an O2 for the north?

Jeremy Wright: As it happens, when I am in London I live very close to the O2, so I hear all kinds of people playing there. The hon. Gentleman is right that we should be looking to deliver the benefits of these kinds of performing opportunities to the whole country. I am happy to talk to him further about what we might do to bring this opportunity to the north, and, of course, all parts of the UK.

T6. [911088] Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Since we are celebrating the achievements of our families today, I would like to wish my daughter Rosie good luck with her grade 5 singing exam and my younger daughter Matilda good luck with her grade 1 piano exam—and, since a mother never leaves out any of her children, congratulate Wilfred on winning his very first swimming badge this week.

Barclays released a report this week showing that more Britons are taking holidays in the UK—staycations—which is a great boost to local economies. As the Member of
Parliament for Sleaford and North Hykeham, I am very fortunate to represent an area that has many fantastic tourist attractions including the International Bomber Command Centre, the National Centre for Craft and Design, Belton House and Doddington Hall. What more are the Government doing to support tourism in Lincolnshire?

Michael Ellis: VisitBritain works very hard to promote the UK internationally, including all our regions, and promotional images from across the country demonstrate our wonderful tourism offer. In addition, VisitEngland has a brilliant programme called the Discover England fund, which helps to ensure that visitors explore all of England, including Lincolnshire. A number of Lincolnshire projects are a part of the initiative including The Explorers’ Road, The Friendly Invasion and the England’s Originals products.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Legal Professionals: Pro Bono Work

1. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [R] [911052]

2. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [911055]

3. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [911059]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): May I start by acknowledging the work of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), my predecessor in this role? I wish him well in his new post in the Ministry of Justice.

I would also like to acknowledge the tremendous work that legal professionals up and down the country do for free every day to help people who are in need and require legal support. The Attorney General and I are the Government’s pro bono champions—I am delighted to take up that role. Earlier this month the Attorney General’s pro bono committee met and discussed how the Attorney General’s Office can help to raise awareness of pro bono work, and I am greatly looking forward to building on this work.

Alex Chalk: The sheer volume of legal advice and assistance that lawyers offer free of charge too often goes unremarked, but is remarkable. It rights wrongs, protects rights and strengthens the rule of law; it deserves our immense gratitude. Will my hon. and learned Friend join me in paying tribute to those lawyers who give up their time to offer support to others, in particular to victims of atrocities such as the Manchester Arena bombing?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is a very well respected criminal barrister and has done a great amount of work here as a member of the Justice Committee. He is absolutely right to highlight the incredible work that lawyers undertake for free, which does go unrecognised. He is also right to highlight the Manchester attack. We are in the anniversary week of that terrible tragedy and my thoughts are with all those who have suffered. The Manchester Law Society did a call for support and over 100 firms and barristers offered free advice and representation.

Maggie Throup: I welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her new role and wish her every success.

As has already been said, pro bono law work is an important resource for all of us as constituency MPs. Given that fact, as well as the message we have heard that lots of pro bono work is being carried out, will my hon. and learned Friend outline what more can be done to encourage law firms and universities outside London to provide more pro bono work?

The Solicitor General: That is a good point, because students can play a critical role in giving support, and of course both London and the regions need to help and support those in need. In my role as a constituency MP, I was at the Anglia Law School law clinic only few weeks ago. It brings law firms in Cambridge together with those studying at the local university to help to support people.

Peter Aldous: I thank the Bar pro bono unit for its work advising constituents who have found themselves in some very difficult situations. The unit is being rebranded as Advocate, and it would be great if the Minister could support Pro Bono Week in November and encourage MPs and their caseworkers to make referrals as early as possible.

The Solicitor General: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has mentioned the work of Advocate, which used to be called the Bar pro bono unit. As a barrister, I was pleased to volunteer for the unit. In fact, more than 3,500 barristers are now registered as advocates for Advocate and, like my hon. Friend, I would encourage Members to refer cases to it. I do so as a constituency MP. I know that Advocate, among others, is involved in the planning of this year’s Pro Bono Week, which will commence on 4 November.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I welcome the Solicitor General to her new position. Solicitors and barristers in towns up and down the country can provide pro bono advice, as I did when I was in practice as a solicitor, only if the practices are there. There is real pressure on the provision of advice in desert areas, because private sector firms are going out of business. What is she going to do about this?

The Solicitor General: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman also did pro bono work; he is to be commended for that. As he will know, the Ministry of Justice is carrying out a review of the market at the moment. There are some areas in which there are not as many law firms offering legal aid as there could be, but that review is already being undertaken.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her new position and wish her well. She will know that the importance of legal advice is a theme that occurs in Gilbert and
Sullivan’s opera “Iolanthe”, in which my wife Anne-Louise and my two stepchildren Victoria and James will be singing principal roles with the Grim’s Dyke Opera this Sunday. Does my hon. and learned Friend recognise that the valuable and magnificent pro bono work done by lawyers is there as a supplement to properly funded legal advice—from public funds as well—and that the two go together? Does she agree that one is not a replacement for the other?

**The Solicitor General:** It is always a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend, who is an excellent Chair of the Justice Committee, I wish Victoria and James every success on Sunday. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that there are many elements to the legal profession. There is of course private work, as well as legal aid and the free service provided through the pro bono work that lawyers provide. We spend £1.6 billion every year on legal aid, and we are continuing to look at how we can best support people in need through legal aid.

**CPS Engagement with Local Communities**

4. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of the adequacy of CPS engagement with local communities on the judicial process.

8. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of the adequacy of CPS engagement with local communities on the judicial process.

**The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer):** The Attorney General’s Office has regular engagement with the Crown Prosecution Service, and we know that the issue of community engagement is of key importance to the CPS. In May 2018, it launched its inclusion and community engagement strategy in addition to the existing consultation groups and scrutiny panels, all of which are pivotal in building trust with all communities in relation to CPS decisions.

**Damien Moore:** I welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her post. Can she give an example of community engagement in my local CPS area?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend’s constituency falls within the Merseyside and Cheshire CPS area, and the inclusion and community engagement manager there is Jennifer Friday. She manages an ambitious programme with high schools and a community conversation with people with learning disabilities, and I commend her work. The local criminal justice board has set up a sub-group to focus on hate crime, which is chaired by the CPS and includes Sefton Council.

**Eddie Hughes:** Does the Minister agree that local engagement with religious and minority groups helps to build public confidence in the criminal justice system?

**The Solicitor General:** It is absolutely vital that the CPS engages with all communities in the region where it operates. There is a variety of local engagement strategies, including through the local scrutiny boards, and I am aware that the local chief Crown prosecutor for the west midlands has specifically engaged with the Muslim community to help to build local relations there.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): Having spoken to victims of crime and to police officers, I feel it would be hugely beneficial for the promotion of engagement and understanding of the CPS if it had the ability to explain charging decisions directly to the victims of crime. Does the Solicitor General agree, and how are we resourcing the CPS to do that work?

**The Solicitor General:** It is absolutely vital that the CPS talks to victims and understands both them and local communities. In fact, the CPS produced an inclusion and community engagement strategy in May 2018, which has been widely recommended. Hate crime and violence against women and girls strategy boards can discuss such issues locally.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I wish the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), well in his new role. Of course, I welcome the hon. and learned Lady to her new appointment.

One area in which community engagement by the Crown Prosecution Service is vital is the terrible crime of rape. The latest Home Office figures show that the proportion of reported rapes reaching prosecution is now at a pitiful 1.7%. In January, the proportion was 1.9%. Why does the Solicitor General think that an awful figure has got even worse in recent months?

**The Solicitor General:** Rape is an absolutely terrible crime, and those who suffer it need to be supported through the criminal justice system. I am pleased that the reporting figures for rape have gone up over the years, and that more people are feeling able to report rape. We have managed to improve those figures through the pilots that we have run in various regions, which are going to be rolled out. Conviction rates still need to go up, and we are looking at how to improve them.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** That percentage was not for convictions, but for the proportion of rapes even reaching charging stage. The Law Officers are presiding over a situation in which more than 98% of reported rapes are not even getting to that stage. We desperately need action, so may I make some suggestions? Let us stop the cuts to the investigative capacity of the police and the CPS, let us get the balance on disclosure right, and let us invest properly in victim support. I say seriously to the Law Officers that the figures are appalling—they must get a grip.

**The Solicitor General:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, rape is one of the most difficult offences to prove, with cases often relying on say-so and the testimony of individuals—the evidence of two people. I recently met the Director of Public Prosecutions to discuss the issue, and he reiterated the importance of collecting evidence in these terrible crimes so that we can bring successful prosecutions.

**Prosecution Rates: Electoral Fraud**

5. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the CPS on prosecution rates for electoral fraud.

**The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox):** The Crown Prosecution Service works closely with the police, including by providing early investigative advice, to consider any
allegations of electoral fraud in accordance with the
code of Crown prosecutors. The Crown Prosecution
Service recognises the importance of protecting democracy,
and all cases involving election offences are referred to
specialist prosecutors within the Crown Prosecution
Service’s special crime and counter-terrorism division.

Dr Huq: Of 266 reported electoral fraud cases last
year, only one resulted in a conviction. The Vote Leave
campaign dropping its appeal is as good as its admitting
the illegality and illegitimacy of the 2016 referendum
result. When will electoral law breaking be treated as a
serious crime? Will the Attorney General also ensure
that there is a full, transparent, independent inquiry
into the foreign funding of Nigel Farage’s new vehicle?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady is quite right
that electoral fraud is serious. From whichever side it
comes—a referendum campaign or a political party—it
must be dealt with according to the law, and it is dealt
with unflinchingly. We have an independent Electoral
Commission that investigates electoral fraud, and it is
right that the Government should allow the commission
to be independent, as it must be. However, if a case is
referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, it is dealt
with precisely according to the code in the same way as
any other offence. It is dealt with by trained specialist
prosecutors, and a single point of contact in each police
force is also trained in election offences. While there may
be many allegations, those that are fit for prosecution
will be prosecuted—I can give the hon. Lady that assurance.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think
that we all agree that electoral fraud should be rooted
out and tackled, but the question is one of priorities.
Many of us fail to understand why the Government
appear obsessed with personation and individual electoral
fraud, spending so much time and energy on a problem
that is virtually non-existent, at a time when the Electoral
Commission finds Vote Leave and other campaigns
guilty of electoral fraud and is currently investigating
the Brexit party. Is it not time that the Government
reassessed their priorities and focused on the organised
campaigns that try to thwart our procedures?

The Attorney General: I cannot comment on any
ongoing investigations that may be carried out, as the
hon. Gentleman will understand, but the Electoral Commission,
as he knows, is independent and is charged with responsibility
for ensuring the integrity of elections. The commission has a full range of powers that it is able to use, and it
takes its decisions with full independence.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that if any prima facie
case of electoral fraud is referred to the Crown Prosecution
Service, it will be dealt with with complete and utter
impartiality, and will be prosecuted.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Very briefly, the remaining questions.

Support for Parliamentarians (Intimidation and Harassment)

6. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps
the CPS is taking to support parliamentarians in responding
to intimidating behaviour and harassment.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): Everyone
should be free to go about their business without
facing abuse or harassment, and the Crown Prosecution
Service recently published an information pack to help
Members of this House and the other place to recognise
possible criminal conduct and to report it to the police.
Criminal offences committed against Members of this
House imperil the democratic process and public service,
and the Crown Prosecution Service is fully committed
to pursuing prosecutions in these cases, wherever
appropriate.

Rebecca Pow: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important that colleagues and members
of staff who think they have been abused or harassed
come forward to report those cases so that we can get
this exemplary system working here in Parliament?

The Attorney General: I do agree, and I am grateful to
my hon. Friend for that question. It is vital that everybody
should have the courage and confidence to be able to
come forward. The pack that was given to all Members
of this House indicates how to report such cases and the
process that will be followed, and that publication is a
good guide. I hope, to the way in which both staff and
Members should deal with the matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is
deepest complacency. These cases are supposed to be
topical questions. Lord Neuberger has said that the
justice system is in crisis because of legal aid cuts.
Does the Attorney General accept that the Crown
Prosecution Service is so under-resourced that it cannot
do its job?

A man drove into a bus queue in my constituency,
killing a little girl and injuring two other people. The CPS
did not even charge him with careless driving. Something
is deeply wrong with the CPS, and the Attorney General
should wake up to it.

The Attorney General: I admire the hon. Gentleman’s
passion, and I am sure it is entirely well grounded and
sincere. The Crown Prosecution Service applies the
code of conduct for prosecutors. In those circumstances,
it is completely right that it does so impartially. I do not
know the case to which he refers but, if he writes to me,
I am certainly willing to look into it. Question 6 is on
the abuse and harassment of Members of this House
and the other place, and I hope we can both agree that
any such abuse and harassment is deplorable and
contemptible, and is an attack upon democracy.

Mr Speaker: Finally, and briefly, Mr Jim Cunningham.

Prosecution of Sexual Offences (Criminal Gangs)

9. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What
recent discussions he has had with the Director of
Public Prosecutions on ensuring more effective prosecutions
of cases of (a) rape and (b) other sexual offences where
the victims are involved in criminal gangs.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The offences
gang-related rape and other sexual violence, including
child sexual exploitation, are dealt with by specially
trained rape and serious sexual offences lawyers who work closely with police investigators to build strong cases. The training is regularly updated, as is the legal guidance, to support the effectiveness of rape and sexual offences prosecutions, including building awareness of victims and the issues connected with victims in the context of gang-related violence.

Mr Cunningham: I draw the Attorney General’s attention to the fact that organisations such as the Coventry rape and sexual abuse centre are struggling to be funded. These organisations play a major role in advising victims. When will these organisations be properly funded, and will he meet me to discuss it?

The Attorney General: Whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to organisations inside or outside the Crown Prosecution Service, I am very happy to meet him if the matter is within my sphere of responsibility. I can assure him that the Government are now reviewing why there is a problem of reported cases of rape going up and the number of convictions and prosecutions going down. We are concerned to tackle it, which is why we are seeking to get to the bottom of the factors that affect it, but they are complicated factors. It is not as easy as saying, “Well, the prosecutors are not prosecuting enough.” There are many factors affecting this question, and we all need to come together to inquire into it and to reach the right solutions.
Speaker’s Statement

10.34 am

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, today marks the last day in the service of the House of the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Philippa Helme. Philippa began in the service of the House on 3 October 1983, so she has served for 35 years, seven months and 20 days. I hope colleagues will agree that she has been a diligent, personable, efficient, ever-helpful and outstanding servant of the House as an institution and of individual Members who have sought her guidance.

I first came to know Philippa in 1997, when I joined the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, of which she was the brilliant Clerk. [Interruption.] Happy days, as the Attorney General pointedly observes from a sedentary position. She has done wonders for this place. She retires after that magnificent tenure and, as she approaches her retirement, we wish Philippa, her husband, Robin, and all the family every possible success, good health and happiness long into the future. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”]
is the regulatory and inspection framework working for these types of services? We want to know why, after whistleblowing concerns had been raised, was the outrageous culture at Whorlton Hall not identified? What went wrong? We will be working to understand in detail the timeline of events, the actions taken and where things might have been addressed earlier. Thirdly, was the oversight of commissioners fit for purpose? Where were the CQC and NHS England in this?

More broadly, there is a range of questions about whether these types of institutions and these types of in-patient settings are ever an appropriate place to keep vulnerable people for any extended length of time and why community provision is not sufficient. Work is continuing on all those subjects as well. We know the problems that exist in the system and we are utterly determined address them.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for that response. Last night’s “Panorama” was deeply shocking and particularly distressing for any family who have a loved one in an institution and are worried about their safety. We saw people with learning disabilities and autism mocked, intimidated, taunted and provoked, and care workers admitting to deliberately hurting patients—behaviour appropriately described as psychological torture. The individuals responsible must be held to account, but so must the provider that allowed this dreadful culture to persist. Will there now be an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive into the possibility of criminal prosecution against the provider?

The truth is that, seven years on from Winterbourne View, the system continues to sanction a model of care that is outdated and wrong. If people are contained in institutions a long way from home, awful things will happen behind closed doors. Will the Secretary of State now take personal responsibility for closing down institutions that provide the wrong model of care? Why does the CQC continue to register new institutions that offer inappropriate institutional care? Does the CQC need new powers? What lessons must we learn from the fact that the CQC rated this place as good? Is this another case of whistleblowers not being listened to? How much was Cygnet charging the NHS per week for this awful abuse and neglect?

This horror comes in the same week as a damning CQC report on segregation, an equally scathing report by the Children’s Commissioner on children being wrongly placed in institutions where force is routinely used and the LeDeR—learning disabilities mortality review—report confirming the extent to which people with learning disabilities and autism are fatally failed by the system. Does the Minister accept that we are tolerating widespread human rights abuses? Is it true that the Government moved forward the publication of the CQC report to pre-empt the “Panorama” report? What families want is not another review; they want action to protect their loved ones.

Will the Government take action to end the endemic use of restraint—including face-down restraint against adults and children—five years after I issued guidance to that end? When will the Government tell us what they will replace the transforming care programme? It ended in March and we are still waiting—there is hardly a sense of urgency. Finally, will there now be substantial investment in the development of community facilities, so that people with learning disabilities and autism have the chance of a good life that the rest of us take for granted?

Caroline Dinenage: These exchanges reflect the views that I am certain we all hold, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising all those questions. The culture and behaviour shown on yesterday’s television programme are absolutely abhorrent and we must stamp them out. More broadly, it is clear from the reports published earlier this week, which the right hon. Gentleman refers to, that we need to do much more to improve the quality of care in mental health wards for anyone with a learning disability or autism. I want to reassure the House that we absolutely recognise that, and steps are being taken to address it.

Societies are rightly judged on the way we treat our most vulnerable citizens. This is not just about reviewing a few individual cases in which things went wrong; it is about a system across health, education, social care and criminal justice—it all needs to change. Today, people will rightly be very angry about what has happened and what was shown on last night’s television programme, and they will want answers. They will also rightly be very angry that, eight years after Winterbourne View, we have another scandalous case in which vulnerable people with learning disabilities or autism are on the receiving end. They will rightly ask what action has been taken and what more we need to do.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, six months ago the Secretary of State commissioned the CQC report on segregation, seclusion and restrictive practices. It was published earlier this week simply because the original publication due date of 31 May is during a recess, and he will know that the Department has come in for enormous criticism in the past for publishing reports when Parliament is in recess, post elections or when the House is not sitting and for publishing late. We wanted to avoid all those things. That is why the date was brought forward. The publication was ready and we took the view to publish it. The publication of the LeDeR report was a matter for NHS England, of course, it being an independent document.

The action we announced in response to the CQC report on Tuesday confirms how seriously we take this issue. We are adamant that no stone should be left unturned in identifying problems, poor practice and care that falls short of what we would expect for our own family members. That said, this is not about segregation or seclusion or failings at specific hospitals, but about the need for far better oversight more generally. Where it is essential that somebody be supported at a distance from their home, we will make sure that those arrangements are supervised. We will not tolerate having people out of sight and out of mind. Where someone with a learning disability or an autistic person has to be an in-patient out of area, they will now be visited on site every six weeks if they are a child and every eight weeks if they are an adult.

The host clinical commissioning group will also be given new responsibilities to oversee and monitor the quality of care provided in their area. This is an issue not just for the regulator, but for those who commission the care. We must be clear that improving the quality of specialist in-patient care is critical, but we are committed to preventing people from entering crisis and having to
be admitted to in-patient care in the first place, and that is what the transforming care programme is about. This programme has not finished. As was highlighted in the NHS long-term plan, the transforming care programme and the building the right support plan continue, and we are renewing and redoubling efforts to reduce the number of people in an in-patient setting by 35%. So far, it is down 22% from 2015, but that endeavour continues. The right hon. Gentleman highlights the report from the Children's Commissioner on Monday. We take the issues they spoke about very seriously.

The right hon. Gentleman asked lots of questions, many of which I think were answered in the three questions I highlighted earlier—the questions that we will be addressing over the coming weeks: criminal liability, oversight and commissioning. Where there have been failings, these will be addressed. Autistic children often have a range of needs or supports that must be joined up, which is why we are reviewing our entire autism strategy and will extend it to include children. As part of the NHS long-term plan, there will be a concerted effort to implement arrangements to ensure that those at the highest risk of admission to a specialist hospital get the help they need, and we will ensure that every area has a dynamic support register in place.

We think that staff in these settings must be much better trained in awareness of learning disabilities and autism, which is why we conducted a thorough inquiry and public consultation on training for learning disabilities and autism. In the coming months, we will set out our response to that consultation and proposals to introduce mandatory training for all health and care staff. We will continue to bring those in-patient numbers down and take every step to take the best practice in health and care and make it the norm everywhere. We will root out toxic cultures and behaviours of the type we saw last night so very painfully on our television screens, but I am fully aware that there is no room for complacency.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important and sensitive matter, but I am looking to move on to the business question at 11 o’clock, so short questions and short—though, I am sure, informative—replies are required.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What happens at the Care Quality Commission’s headquarters when a story such as this emerges? Are the inspectors summoned in for a meeting without coffee, or perhaps with the rough end who so recently rated the facility summoned in for a when a story such as this emerges? Are the inspectors taking the situation incredibly seriously. Some massive concerns were raised last night, and Paul Lelliott from the CQC apologised and said that the matter would be very thoroughly addressed and investigated by its team.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I appreciate the Minister’s response, but the Secretary of State really should be here to deal with this. The abuse shown on the BBC “Panorama” programme last night was appalling, and it should never have been allowed to happen. The fact that it is eight years since the Winterbourne View scandal and nothing has changed should be a source of shame for the Government. Rather than warm words—the Government seem to be getting good at warm words these days, but little else—will the Minister take personal responsibility and tell us what she is doing to ensure that this never happens again?

The abuse that was shown was tantamount to psychological torture, with residents sworn at, threatened and intimidated. Other residents were violently restrained or deliberately hurt by care staff. As the Minister has mentioned, other cases—such as Mendip House and Thors Park—show that this is not an isolated incident; it is part of a pattern of cruel and callous behaviour in such institutions. There is only one sure way to end this abuse, and that is to close down the institutions and move people into supported placements in the community.

Many of the people who were abused at Whorlton Hall were hundreds of miles from their families. Does the Minister recognise that cutting people off from their support networks allows such abuse to carry on without anyone noticing? Labour has pledged £350 million extra per year to ensure that people can move from such institutions and be supported in the community instead. Will the Minister match that commitment?

In 2011, the Government pledged to end the use of units such as Whorlton Hall. Eight years later, however, there are still more than 2,200 people detained in inappropriate institutions. More recent targets, which were less ambitious, were also missed. After years of broken promises, autistic people, people with learning disabilities and their families cannot trust the Government to deliver on their promises. Is it not time the Government brought in an independent commissioner to oversee the closure of such units?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not agree with the hon. Lady that what I have said today is about warm words; it is about action. The CQC report that came out on Tuesday was commissioned by our Secretary of State to really shine a light on the matter. We are shining a light on some of the most distressing information so that we can address it—so that we cannot brush it under the carpet and speak warm words about it. Not only did we accept all the CQC’s recommendations, but we made more recommendations of our own that we intend to put into practice.

In answer to some of the hon. Lady’s questions, I am very clear that as far as possible, people should be treated in a community setting. If they have to go into an in-patient setting, they should be as close to home as possible and they should be there for the shortest possible time, with a very clear route out and plan for their future. To help to deliver that, we have committed £4.5 billion to community funding as part of the NHS long-term plan, and I expect a good proportion of that money to be spent on investing in the community settings that we need.

Barbara Keeley Why not close them?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is saying from a sedentary position that we should close settings, but we are talking about very vulnerable people who have complex needs and require special care, and we need to make sure that there are sufficient services in the community to support them. It would be a complete dereliction of our duty and responsibility to take people out of one setting that is not working for them and put them into another setting that will be as bad, or worse.
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I thank the Minister for her robust efforts to get to grips with the matter. I have heard from my constituents overnight that they have no confidence in the CQC if it thought it could get away with assessing Whorlton Hall as good. If it takes an undercover investigator to highlight a message that whistleblowers are not getting through, why are the Government not taking immediate action properly to investigate every single in-patient centre so that the Minister can look us all in the eye and say, “I know which places are safe and which are not”?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. I think the CQC itself admitted to this. In fact, some of its social media engagement over the past 24 hours has been unprecedented in its level of frankness and openness, and in the way in which it has shown a desire to change and make this situation better. It has been very disturbing for everybody concerned, and it is true that NHS England has started enhanced oversight and scrutiny of this particular group’s other learning disability and autism settings to try to ensure that we are not going to uncover any more stories of such horror.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What was revealed on “Panorama” last night was truly horrific. This was public service broadcasting at its best, but it should not have taken the BBC to uncover the case; the CQC got this totally wrong. However, whatever the failings of the CQC, ultimate responsibility must lie with those who own and manage these homes and make money out of them. I am therefore extremely concerned with those who own and manage these homes and make money out of them. I am therefore extremely concerned.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady knows that I listen very carefully to what she says. I completely share her frustration about the delays to the social care Green Paper, but I do not think that we should ever be held back from making progress on all the things that are wrong in society that we care very deeply about because we are awaiting the publication of some such documents. We will therefore be pushing forward with all the work on a lot of the issues that I have spoken about today as a matter of great urgency.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mencap has called for a cross-Department ministerial working group to review the system, and a taskforce made up of people with real-life experience of dealing with people with learning disabilities and autism. Will my hon. Friend confirm that she will set up both such groups so that we can get some action in helping people who are suffering?

Anne Longfield in the role. That has been an enormous success, and perhaps we need a commissioner to reappraise the whole sector. Some people have said this morning that we should keep these children and adults living in the setting was therefore our immediate concern, as well as finding alternative places for many of them to go. At that point, there was an incident co-ordination group that included Cygnet because it is the owner, but that group was set up to deal with the immediate situation that needed to be dealt with very promptly.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The NHS has been using a system of ambulatory care, particularly to deal with elderly patients by treating them in their home, plus a hospital visit. Why has this not been rolled out quicker to those with learning disabilities and autism?

Caroline Dinenage: That is what we are looking towards, which is why the Government are putting so much more money—£4.5 billion of the extra investment in the NHS—into the sorts of community services that we need to make exactly that a reality. There are cases where people do end up in an in-patient setting, often because services have failed and their situation has almost reached crisis point. The transforming care and building the right support system that I spoke about earlier is all about ensuring that we get people out of those settings as quickly as possible and into the right kind of support in the community.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Too many people are ending up in terrible institutional care hundreds of miles from home for the want of much more appropriate community care, including social care. The Minister has spoken about not wanting to delay the publication of reports, but she will know that the delay to the social care Green Paper has been unaccountably prolonged. Will she bring forward the social care Green Paper, because this issue lies at the root of inappropriate admissions?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady knows that I listen very carefully to what she says. I completely share her frustration about the delays to the social care Green Paper, but I do not think that we should ever be held back from making progress on all the things that are wrong in society that we care very deeply about because we are awaiting the publication of such documents. We will therefore be pushing forward with all the work on a lot of the issues that I have spoken about today as a matter of great urgency.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I chair the Westminster Commission on Autism. The Minister will know that people on social media are asking why it took a television programme to reveal this. Can we learn the lessons quickly? I make no party political point—these crises have happened under other Governments, but we have to learn the lessons and reappraise the whole sector. Some people have said this morning that we should keep these children and adults close to home, in their communities, and that is right. We should also look at something that has really worked, which is the Children’s Commissioner, especially with someone like Anne Longfield in the role. That has been an enormous success, and perhaps we need a commissioner for autism, who would give a voice and a personality to this kind of crisis.

Caroline Dinenage: I greatly respect all the work that the hon. Gentleman does with autistic people, and I know he is passionate about this. He is right. We have committed to review the autism strategy. The Autism
[Caroline Dinenage]

Act 2009 is the only condition-specific piece of legislation in British law, and we want to ensure that it continues to be fit for purpose. The consultation on the autism strategy review has just closed, and we will look carefully at everything that comes out of it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What protection is in place for those who come forward to shine a light on allegations relating to such grave care? What is the Minister’s message to people who have concerns?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Mr Steve Reed) for raising that, because it is the whistleblowers who have brought these concerns to everyone’s attention. It is deeply regrettable that whistleblowers brought this to people’s attention before, and it was investigated, but this abuse was not rooted out and stopped. We need more protection for whistleblowers. We have accepted some of the CQC’s recommendations on encouraging whistleblowers to come forward, and we are always looking at more ways to offer protection and encourage them to do so. It is always wrong when deeply disturbing practices have to be brought to light by those who shine a light on them.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Children with autism and learning disabilities are still being pinned face-down on the floor, tied to beds or locked up in seclusion rooms. The Government promised five years ago to publish guidance to prevent that kind of abuse, but they still have not done it. After Whorlton Hall, we desperately need a date. When will the Government publish that guidance?

Caroline Dinenage: The Secretary of State commissioned a report on exactly that—segregation and restrictive practice. It was published on Tuesday, and we have accepted all the recommendations. We are working very hard on this. There will be guidance, but it is more important than that. As shown in the TV programme last night, there was training and guidance on the restrictive practices to be implemented, but it was ignored, and restraint was recorded incorrectly. This is a much bigger issue than the one the hon. Gentleman highlights.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I see more and more families in my surgery with loved ones who suffer from autism or learning difficulties being failed by the system. Will the Minister give an assurance to my constituents and their families that there will be a genuine focus in the NHS long-term plan on these vulnerable people?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; she is right to raise it. Autism and learning disability are both mentioned as clinical priorities in the NHS long-term plan. That is absolutely right, and we must relentlessly continue that focus.

Business of the House

11.3 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to business questions and ask him to give us the forthcoming business?

The Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household (Mark Spencer): Although the House will realise that I am not the Leader of the House, I welcome the opportunity on behalf of the Government to set out the business and to take questions from colleagues today. Mr Speaker, it is a pleasure once again to have my voice heard within this Chamber, without being chastised by you for doing so.

The business for the week commencing 3 June will include:

Monday 3 June—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 4 June—Remaining stages of the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on the mineworkers’ pension scheme. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 5 June—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975 (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Thursday 6 June—General debate on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire, followed by a debate on a motion on mortgage prisoners and vulture funds. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 7 June—The House will not be sitting.

We will update the House on the publication and introduction of the withdrawal agreement Bill on our return from the Whitsun recess.

Before I sit down, I would like to pay tribute to a superb outgoing Leader of the House. I think the whole House, across all Benches, will agree with me that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) was a dedicated Leader of the House who was passionate about her responsibilities in this Chamber. She made a real difference during her time in post. As the Prime Minister recognised yesterday, she leaves a legacy of championing reform in this House. She was unfailingly dedicated to changing the culture within Westminster. She introduced a new complaints system to this House, was pivotal to the introduction of proxy voting and took on the challenge of setting the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster in train. She is an excellent colleague, she was a formidable Leader of the House and I wish her the very best for the future.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for stepping up and giving us the forthcoming business. I do not know what I have done wrong, but it seems there is some sort of relationship with my hon. Friend the
Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who has got two extra Back-Bench days; I am obviously going to ask for our Opposition day back.

I, too, want to place on record my thanks to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), whom I have shadowed for I think nearly two years. She has made a huge contribution in pulling together new policies on bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, with the establishment of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, and in working with all colleagues across the House and across parties to ensure the system for the first proxy votes for our colleagues has been put in place.

The right hon. Lady’s commitment to the restoration and renewal programme culminated in the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, which passed its Second Reading on Tuesday. I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who made a wonderful debut at the Dispatch Box, for opening and closing the debate for Her Majesty’s Opposition; I had a long-standing personal commitment, which involved wearing a hat. I also want to thank the deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), who has also enabled us to get to this place on restoration and renewal. The non-execs are always going on at us that we and our staff do not do the fire safety and safety training, so I encourage all Members to do that, and also—as the outgoing Leader of the House would say—the training on the behaviour code.

We are in “Brexit paralysis”—the words of a Government Minister. The Government have had three years, with five major speeches and red lines which never changed, and that have brought us to this position. Yesterday, the Prime Minister told the House that the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill would be in the week commencing 3 June; we now hear it is not, so in less than 24 hours the Prime Minister has broken her word. This is yet another broken promise by the Prime Minister on Brexit. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm why the Bill is not coming forward for its Second Reading as promised, and when is it likely to do so? Why is the Prime Minister incapable of keeping her word? Will it actually be published on 24 May, as the Prime Minister told the Commons yesterday, or will this be another broken promise? Why did the Prime Minister raise the issue of EU election purdah, when last week the Leader of the House said that there was no such issue and that the Government had received advice to that effect? Will the Bill be published in draft form so that hon. Members can amend it? When will it receive its First Reading? How long will we have to debate it, and how many days will it be in Committee, if it achieves its Second Reading?

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Prime Minister has become part of the problem? Even Ministers in her Cabinet know that she must go. Yet again, she has put her own political survival ahead of the national interest. It is clear that she does not command a majority for her approach to Brexit, and she has failed to accept that political reality. The Prime Minister has failed in the central policy of her Government, and the continuation of the current political situation leaves our country without the leadership it needs. The country cannot continue without an effective Government, and a fresh approach to leadership is clearly required.

It is not just with Brexit that there is paralysis—there is paralysis everywhere else. British Steel is among the UK’s most important manufacturers. It is one of Network Rail’s largest suppliers, and 95% of rails are supplied by the Scunthorpe plant. More importantly, this is about the lives of nearly 4,500 people and their families, mainly in Scunthorpe but also at the Teesside plants, and there are as many as 20,000 more people in the supply chain. This issue will not just affect people now—it will affect future generations. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) asked whether the company is a good steward for that vital business, and the Government are in paralysis, which will affect future generations.

In the run-up to International Children’s Day on 1 June, two alarming reports have highlighted that the Government are failing in their duty to protect the most vulnerable children. The report by the Children’s Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, is entitled “Who are they? Where are they? Children locked up”, and for the first time it gathers together all the data about children living in children’s homes, youth justice settings, mental health wards, and other residential placements. In England, 1,465 children were detained in 2018, and the report found that an additional 211 children were locked away and their whereabouts in the system is invisible.

In 2016 the Health Committee, of which I was a member, produced a report on this issue, but no action has been taken. A Care Quality Commission report published this week found that 62 people are living in segregation in mental health settings, and 20 of those are children or young people. In 16 cases people had spent more than a year in isolation, with children and young people staying for up to two and a half years. The Minister said earlier that the Government are setting up a taskforce. Will he come to the House and update it on what is going on?

Human Rights Watch has said that the Government are breaching their international duty to keep people from hunger by pursuing “cruel and harmful policies” with no regard for the impact on children living in poverty. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, published his final report, stating that child poverty in Britain today is “not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster.”

If the Government are challenging that, why can we not have a debate in Government time to consider those statistics and hear about their next steps? Those are independent reports.

This week we heard harrowing testimony about the London attacks, and about the heroic actions of doctors and nurses, and of people helping each other, including Ignacio Echeverria, who went towards the attackers with his skateboard trying to save lives. It is also the second anniversary of the Manchester bombings and those young people who went to a concert. At a concert, and on a Saturday night out, that loss of innocent lives will never be forgotten.

Finally, Philippa, thank you very much, and good luck.

Mark Spencer: I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments about the former Leader of the House. They enjoyed a sparky relationship across the Dispatch Box, but I
know it was one of mutual respect. My right hon. Friend has a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady, and she enjoyed her time opposing her at the Dispatch Box.

We plan to publish the withdrawal agreement Bill in the week commencing 3 June. We had hoped it would have its Second Reading on Friday 7 June, but at the moment we have not secured agreement for that through the usual channels. We will, of course, update the House when we return from recess.

The hon. Lady is right to draw the attention of the House to the steel industry. Hon. Members from across the Chamber will have listened to the urgent question and ministerial statement this week. The Business Secretary is currently engaged with Greybull and British Steel to try to find a resolution. The Government recognise the importance of that and recognise that our constituents’ jobs and livelihoods depend on it. We will do all we can to assist and try to secure a way forward.

On vulnerable children, the hon. Lady is right to draw the attention of the House to this challenge. The Government recognise that we need to find a way forward. We need to work together and continue the battle against poverty. We need to drive in the right direction as fast we can, but we can only do that if we have economic success. We need to use the economic success the Government have created to resource and move forward.

Turning to the rapporteur the hon. Lady referred to, I wholly reject that report. The report actually talks about Governments from the second world war onward, including Governments that Opposition Members were members of. I reject the notion that this country since the second world war has not made significant progress. Governments of all colours have tried to tackle these issues and move forward. This Government continue in that direction and are doing all they can to move forward.

The hon. Lady made reference to the Manchester bombing. That was a terrible event and I think that is one topic that unites the whole House. When children and young adults go out to a concert they expect to do so in safety and for someone to commit an abhorrent act, as they did on that evening, is beyond words. We should be grateful to the emergency services who have to deal with the aftermath of such events and pay tribute to them.

Before I sit down I would like to add my voice to those who have paid tribute to the retiring Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Philippa Helme. I wish Colin Lee success as he takes over the role.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join you, Mr Speaker, and others in paying tribute to our retiring Clerk, Philippa Helme. She and I joined the House at roughly the same time. Throughout her time here she has given wise advice. If only it had been taken by everyone. I wish her a happy retirement sailing and with her dogs. The tragedy, Mr Speaker, is that she leaves this place when in my judgment Parliament is at an all-time low.

Moving on to more pleasant things, will my hon. Friend or whoever will be Leader of the House find time for a debate—there is plenty of time for a debate on anything and everything—on the enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988, of which I was the promoter? I find it very disappointing that a number of local authorities do not, for whatever reason, employ animal welfare inspectors. There is no earthly good this place legislating unless our laws are enforced by someone.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a vociferous campaigner on animal rights. The Government uphold our high standards on welfare, including in relation to tethering. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is an offence to fail to provide for an animal’s welfare or to cause it unnecessary suffering. If anybody is concerned about the way in which an animal has been tethered or treated, they can report that to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or World Horse Welfare. They can investigate and, if necessary, take out prosecutions. This topic would make an excellent suggestion for an Adjournment debate. I am sure that Mr Speaker would be sympathetic to such an appeal.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing the business for the week that we come back. May I too wish you, Philippa, all the very best in your retirement? Enjoy yourself. You deserve it.

I was not sure whether there would even be a business statement this morning and it is certainly a novelty to have business questions without a Leader of the House, but may I start by wishing the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) all the best? I enjoyed our banter on Thursday mornings. I think we will all miss her good-natured and convivial approach at business questions. I think we should all thank her for the very determined leadership she offered on a whole range of issues across the House, from tackling bullying and sexual harassment to proxy voting for baby leave. We wish her all the best.

I, Mr Speaker, will now be going on to my fourth Leader of the House in four years. I am looking forward to seeing who will be at the Dispatch Box when we return, but it has to be asked: who would want the job? We have a Prime Minister hanging on by her fingertips, barricaded into No. 10, and a Government collapsing around her ears, as we speak.

Just what on earth is this so-called business for the week after next? We were promised the withdrawal agreement Bill on the Tuesday and Wednesday that we return. Unless it has been renamed the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill, which was always quite likely, I am afraid I do not see it anywhere in the business statement. Can the temporary Leader of the House tell us when we will see the withdrawal agreement Bill? I heard him say something about a Friday, which I did not quite understand. Perhaps he can flesh that out a little, because the House wants to know when and if we are going to have it.

The business is all Backbench business. The Government should make my friend the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) the new Leader of the House, given that they are taking all their business to him. He would make a very good job of it, too. [Interruption.] He says, “Taking coals to Newcastle”—indeed. What is intriguing about the withdrawal agreement Bill is that it seems to offer the prospect of a second referendum. The Tories
in Scotland are running around today saying that they are the party that is resolutely against any future referendums, so what has happened with the withdrawal agreement Bill is that the Government have deprived these one-trick ponies of their one trick.

It is hard to believe that we are having an EU election today, but the Government should be commended for one thing: the Tories’ attempts to make sure that no one votes for them look like being extremely successful. But in Scotland it is entirely different: people can vote to keep Scotland in the European Union and to make our votes for them look like being extremely successful. But one thing: the Tories’ attempts to make sure that no one votes for them will get that when they vote SNP today.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words about the former Leader of the House. I know that she enjoyed the sparky relationship that she had diagonally across the Chamber with him.

We are hoping to publish the withdrawal agreement Bill in the week commencing 3 June. During discussions with the usual channels, we will see when that comes forward, but at the moment we have not secured agreement through the usual channels and we will update the House when we return after recess. The hon. Gentleman is able to feed into the usual channels and I am sure that he will use his influence to do so. I also say to him that he jumps in and starts to condemn the withdrawal agreement Bill before he has even read it. He should wait until it is published. He can take the opportunity to read through it and then form his opinion, instead of jumping the gun and deciding that he is going to oppose it.

Of course, I wish all the candidates standing in the European elections the very best for election day today. I hope that everybody will go out and vote. I have voted Conservative already and I hope that many other people will do the same.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I welcome the excellent acting Leader of the House to the Dispatch Box; his clarity on these occasions is up to the previous Leader’s clarity. Will he explain to us how the usual channels have anything to do with when a Government Bill is debated in the Chamber? I just do not follow that. However, my main question to the excellent acting Leader of the House is this: there is some speculation, however remote, that the Prime Minister might resign tomorrow. Could we have a statement on what mechanism there is to recall the House? Surely whether the House is recalled during the recess should be up to the House, and not up to the Government.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will be aware that any decision to recall the House is a procedure that is set out and which everybody understands. There are currently no plans to recall the House at any point in the future. I am sure that he will be engaging with all the usual channels, including the Whips Office, to make sure that his views are listened to and heard. I am sure that he will take every opportunity to make sure that his vociferous and well known views are taken fully into account.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the acting Leader of the House for announcing the very first Backbench business week in this place—it is very welcome. With the assistance of the Clerks and members of the Backbench Business Committee, we managed at very short notice to pull together business to fill the void that the Government highlighted to us, so that there are debates to be had on the 4 and 5 June. There are still significant concerns among Members and we have a long list of unheard Backbench business debates.

May I echo your comments, Mr Speaker, about Philippa Helme? Philippa, I wish you a long, healthy and happy retirement. It is undoubtedly deserved and you go with my very best wishes.

I also echo the comments that have been made about the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). In my role as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, she has always been a pleasure to work with. She has been approachable and open to discussion about developing Backbench business as an entity within this House, and I thank her for that.

Mark Spencer: I support the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the retiring Clerk. I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman would be a little more grateful: I have been in this role for nearly 20 minutes and I have already secured him three debates. He turns up every week asking for more time for Backbench business debates and when he gets it he is still not happy. We can only provide that service to him. I know that Backbench business debates are valued across the House, and he does a fine job of making sure that we get the right topics at the right moment.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is good to hear a Nottinghamshire accent at the Dispatch Box—almost as good as a Lincolnshire one. You and I know, Mr Speaker, that levity is sometimes virtuous here, as it lightens the burden of the work we do, but it is with a heavy heart today that I must challenge the flawed decisions of the perverso Parole Board that let vicious criminals—indeed, heartless murderers—back on to our streets. The Government promised to act to introduce a reconsideration mechanism by which victims’ families could ask for a review, but that has not yet come in. Will my hon. Friend therefore ask the Law Officers to enact an immediate review of all Parole Board decisions? It is vital that the liberal establishment grasps what our constituents know: that there is a world of difference between kind hearts and soft heads.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on matters of law and order. I know that he will take the opportunity to raise his concerns at Justice questions on 4 June, when a Minister will be able to respond to him directly.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Brixham Trawler Agents in my constituency recently invested £107,000 in rooftop solar for the fish market. It applied in good faith and in advance of the deadline, but unfortunately fell the wrong side of the cap. It therefore faces considerable unexpected costs. Given that the House has now declared a climate and environment emergency, may we have a debate about how we can properly reward those who are doing the right thing by trying to reduce their carbon footprint and serve their communities?

Before I finish, I join others in thanking Philippa Helme for the remarkable work she has done. I thank her personally and on behalf of Select Committees for
everything, and I wish her a long and happy retirement. Will the Minister also send my personal good wishes to the retiring Leader of the House? I thank her for the constructive work she has done to support Select Committees.

Mark Spencer: Of course I will pass on the hon. Lady’s good wishes to the former Leader of the House. In January, the Government published a consultation, “The future for small-scale low-carbon generation”, on a smart export guarantee to follow the feed-in tariff scheme, which closed to new products on 31 March, with some limited grace periods and extensions. The SEG will ensure that small-scale generators, including those using solar, can export to the grid and receive payment. We are analysing the results of the consultation and aim to publish the Government response in due course.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I shall be seeing the Azerbaijan ambassador later today, and I will pass on the views of the House to him about the situation with Chelsea and Arsenal fans, and Arsenal players.

We have just witnessed in India the historic, landslide re-election of the BJP, and Shri Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating him on his re-election? Can we have a debate in Government time on our relationship with India and how we have forged this friendship that goes back over 300 years?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw the attention of the House to what is, I think, the largest democratic vote in the world. I congratulate the new Prime Minister of the Indian state. This would be an excellent topic for an Adjournment debate or a Backbench business debate. I encourage him to take the opportunity to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee so that we can all celebrate our relationship with the Indian state.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last Saturday, I attended a community iftar at the Salfia centre in Dewsbury. It was a fabulous evening with people from all walks of life coming together to understand and celebrate Ramadan with our Muslim friends. At a time when it feels like division and hatred are on the rise, does the hon. Gentleman agree that these events are more important than ever? May we have a debate on how we promote love and understanding among our neighbours?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I think she is actually out there doing the job herself in attending such events. In raising this topic in the House today, she has almost started that process. Again, it is an ideal topic for an Adjournment debate to draw people’s attention to how we all need to co-operate and get on with each other. Such community events are a great way to assist with that process.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): This weekend, thousands of football fans will be heading to Wembley for the football league play-off finals. As a fellow east midlands MP, I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to wish Derby County every success in their match against Aston Villa. Many supporters will be travelling by train. Will he consider a debate in Government time about the capacity of the rail network and how HS2 will benefit football fans in future?

Mark Spencer: As a committed Nottingham Forest fan, I can honestly say that in all my time as Leader of the House, that is the worst question I have had. The fans who are travelling to Wembley clearly need to get there in good time—they do not want to miss the match—and those train links are absolutely vital. I know that my hon. Friend has been vociferous in pursuing improved links to Derbyshire for her constituents. I take this opportunity to wish those supporting Aston Villa all the best.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my congratulations to Philippa, who is retiring? I have known her for all her career here. She is a wonderful woman because she can combine ruthless efficiency with being really kind, pleasant and supportive. That is a very interesting synthesis. I thank her for all her work and all the help she has given me.

I had an eerie feeling after the two Front Benchers had spoken, because the E-word was not mentioned. Here we are in this democratically elected House, but no one seemed to have the courage to mention that the European elections are taking place today. [Interruption.] In response to SNP Members, it was mentioned by their spokesman. Could we have an early debate on how we tackle the issue of democratic participation in this country? Even in a good year, the turn-out in European elections is poor. The turn-out in general elections is not that good. Some people argue for compulsory voting. It is a very important day today. People should go out and vote, because when they do not, good people do not get elected, and nasty and even nastier people do get elected. Let us have a good democratic vote today, and let us have a good discussion about how we increase participation in democracy.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we have a responsibility as politicians to make sure that as many people as possible engage in the political process—I have certainly done my bit by voting today. I hope the colour of the hon. Gentleman’s tie does not indicate a change of political allegiance—he is looking very green. A Westminster Hall debate might be the ideal vehicle to discuss these issues, and I know that Members on both sides of the House would want to join in trying to find a solution to get more people engaged in politics and democracy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): One of the many things that I would like to thank the former Leader of the House for was her passionate support for the “give up plastic for Lent” campaign, with the leadership she gave and the game way in which she took that on. One of the campaign’s recommendations was the ban on straws, stirrers and cotton buds that came into effect yesterday, although sadly other news might have overtaken that. While this is a busy time in Westminster, can we make absolutely sure that our focus on the environment is not second stage and that proper time continues to be made available for debates about the environment and how we all can build a cleaner, greener planet?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend often champions environmental issues and she is right to draw the House’s attention to the recent progress that has been made.
The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is committed to improving the conditions for generations to come, and my hon. Friend is right to call for a review along those lines to once again highlight the environmental improvements that this Government continue to make.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): Now that we are going to get a new Leader of the House, perhaps we can have another look at the proposals to refurbish the parliamentary estate, because I think people will think we have gone mad if we are to spend billions of pounds refurbishing this place. I was shocked to discover we are going to spend £1.5 billion on a fancy new Chamber at Richmond House. Imagine the impact that money would have in a community in the Black Country that sorely needs extra investment in schools, housing, roads, the police and so much more. Let us have another look at this proposal. I think we should take the opportunity to move Parliament out of London to the midlands, preferably the Black Country—to somewhere in the middle of the country. [Interruption.] This is a serious proposal. Let us do something radical and ensure that the metropolitan London-based elite running this country finds out what life is like in the rest of Britain. Unlike any other country, we have Government, politics, the media, finance and business all concentrated in the capital. Let us take this opportunity to move Government and Parliament out of London and rebalance our country and economy.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. Of course, we had a vigorous debate about this only on Tuesday and I hope he took the opportunity to engage in it. The future of this building is important to the nation. I think that people recognise the iconic status of this building as not only the home of Parliament, but a treasure for the nation. We have a responsibility, as the incumbents of the House, to make sure it is maintained for many generations to come. I hope the hon. Gentleman will continue to engage in this debate. He is one of a number of colleagues who have made representations to move Parliament to their own constituency, but the House has decided that the best course of action is to remain here, within this secure area, and we have to move forward in that direction.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The residents of North Hykeham have to put up with terrible traffic congestion. Does my hon. Friend agree that what is needed is the completion of the Lincoln bypass and that that should be a priority for the Government? May we have a debate on that matter?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will be aware that Transport questions are on 13 June, when she will have the opportunity to raise that directly with the relevant Minister. I know she is a campaigner for the people of North Hykeham and that they will be delighted that she has taken the trouble to raise the Lincoln relief road here today. She continues to represent her constituents very well.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Imam Şiş, a member of the Kurdish community in Newport, is on day 158 of a hunger strike, and we again highlight the environmental improvements that this Government might be moving on some of the campaign demands, so please may we have an urgent statement

from a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister on what the Government understand the current situation to be?

Mark Spencer: I am very sorry to hear that that gentleman finds himself with no option but to pursue that course of action. I know that the hon. Lady will want to represent the ongoing campaign directly with the Foreign Secretary, and if she would like me to assist in that process of direct communication with the Foreign Secretary, I will do all I can to help her to register the points that she wants to raise.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): In Redditch, we are proud of our heritage. We make needles, fish hooks and springs, and we have led the world in those industries, but Members might not know that we are also famous for Royal Enfield motorbikes. Will the Minister pay tribute to Royal Enfield for returning to Redditch, and will he thank the borough council for all the work it has done to secure this historic achievement? Will he also push his friends in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to look again at how business rates can be used to support such projects in order to revitalise our high streets?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to all those in Redditch. This demonstrates that, with the right support and by working with local authorities, we can help and support the high street and manufacturing so that we retain jobs and keep the economy moving forward, meaning that we can generate tax and spend it on the nice things we want to spend it on, such as more doctors, nurses and police officers.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): May we have an urgent statement on the Government’s policy regarding the surveying of coastal areas for potential oil and gas deposits? This is in the light of widespread concern at a proposal to conduct seismic surveys in areas of Cardigan bay, which is home to the largest resident population of dolphins and porpoises in the UK. A statement clarifying that the Government do not support such a venture would be welcome, and it would also demonstrate the integrity of the Government’s commitment to achieving net zero carbon emissions.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I know that seismic surveys—certainly for shale gas—are a topic that many colleagues want to engage in. It is vital that any such survey is regulated by the Environment Agency, that there is scrutiny of all the issues as plans are moved forward, and that the planning process is completely robust so that his constituents can be confident that the right process will take place and no environmental damage will be committed.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): “Channel 4 News” has revealed that in the past two years the Northern Ireland Office has spent just £318 on advancing LGBT rights in Northern Ireland, a part of the UK where people are still denied the right to marry if they are in a same-sex relationship. I do not think that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has done anything on this since she took office. May we have a statement from her in which she can explain exactly what action she is taking to advance LGBT rights in Northern Ireland?
Mark Spencer: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a renowned campaigner on these issues—I pay tribute to him for that. The Secretary of State does take these issues seriously, and I suggest that he writes directly to her to express his views and to hold her to account.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his well-deserved meteoric rise. I want to ask a question following a meeting that I had with a constituent last week. He has been a victim of fraud and, over several months, he has been sending information to the police about the circumstances behind that. However, he has now been told that the police are not going to investigate the alleged offence because they do not have the resources to do so. In fact, they have a policy that they do not investigate allegations of fraud under £15 million, which is absolutely disgraceful. Is this something that the Government endorse? Will the Home Secretary make a statement to clarify whether this is now Government policy?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my trajectory, but of course what goes up must come down—I think that if he watches this space, it will come down quite rapidly. We will have Justice questions on 4 June, and I know that he will be in the Chamber to try to raise that topic again. I am also informed that the Treasury Committee is looking into the issue. I would ask him to submit any evidence to that Committee to ensure that it is as fully informed about that investigation as possible.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The dwindling ranks of the Conservative party membership will soon elect a Prime Minister with no public mandate to lead a Government without a majority to try to enforce a policy that is way past its sell-by date. With House business now in suspended animation, does not the hon. Gentleman agree that the people of the United Kingdom deserve an urgent statement from what remains of the Government to tell them exactly what the hell is going on in this place?

Mark Spencer: The one thing that the hon. Gentleman cannot accuse the Prime Minister of is not keeping this House informed. No one has stood at this Dispatch Box more than the Prime Minister; she has always kept the House informed about the progress being made. Of course the hon. Gentleman is completely within his rights to make any party political point that he wants, but we need to work together as a House of Commons to find a solution to deliver on the Brexit challenge we face, and I would expect him to approach that in a mature and co-operative way if we are to try to assist our constituents.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituency has a high-rise tower block called Lystedt Flats. Its cladding was recently removed, and the residents are living in fear of their health because no one is taking responsibility to re-clad it. The UK Government recently announced funding for English residences and high rises, so will the Minister assure me and the Welsh Government that there will be fair funding so that my residents do not have to live in fear of their health?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to the matter. Some people living in high-rise blocks clearly have great concerns about their safety, and the Government are doing all they can to try to solve that challenge in the aftermath of the terrible Grenfell fire. I know that the hon. Lady will take part in the Grenfell Tower debate on 6 June, which presents an ideal opportunity to make such points and to register her concerns, which she rightly highlights on behalf of her constituents.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I join colleagues in paying tribute to Philippa Helme for the advice she has given and wish her a happy retirement.

Many people who turn up at polling stations today will be told that they are not able to vote. Even though they are legally entitled to vote, they will have not received postal vote envelopes from their local authorities in time, or they may be EU nationals who have not been able to get the extra form that they are required to sign. Postal voters living in France, Spain and other parts of the world are also not entitled to vote because they have not received their postal vote forms in time because of the incompetence of some local authorities. May we have an early debate on the role and responsibilities of the Government, the Electoral Commission and local authorities in ensuring that people who are legally entitled to vote are able to do so?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to that important matter. As I said earlier, we have a vital responsibility to ensure that people are able to engage in the political process. He will be pleased to know that Cabinet Office questions will be on Wednesday 5 June as they are the ideal opportunity for him to raise the matter directly with Ministers. I am sure that he will continue to champion the cause of all those who want to participate in our democratic process.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister consider holding a debate in Government time on the important role of community-led master planning in charting the future of our communities? In Glasgow North East, the Springburn regeneration charrette took place in March and over 1,000 people in the community were involved in looking at master planning. It was masterminded by Helen Carroll and the Springburn Community Council, and there has been a great effort to try to achieve the regeneration of our community. Will the Minister commend that work and the work of architects Kevin Murray Associates? I hope that the report, which will be published next week, will offer a great way forward for the rebuilding of the community of Springburn.

Mark Spencer: I would welcome that. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for trying to engage in that process and for ensuring that his constituents have the opportunity to make representations about the development of their community. The towns and villages in which we live have developed over hundreds of years, and the more that we can engage people in that process, the more ownership and pride they will feel in their communities. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all the work that he is doing.
**Point of Order**

11.49 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. One thing was omitted from the congratulations paid to Philippa Helme by Mr Speaker, and I take this opportunity to congratulate her on her work over the past few years as a trustee of the Industry and Parliament Trust. I happen to be the trust’s deputy chairman, so it is appropriate for me to congratulate her on an enormous amount of hard work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order, not least because it gives me the chance to give my own thanks to Philippa. I have found her cool, calm advice, which is obviously always right, to be absolutely invaluable, and all the Deputy Speakers are so grateful for her dedicated service to the House. Philippa, we will miss you. Happy sailing.

**Backbench Business**

**Yemen Peace Process**

11.51 am

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I beg to move, that this House notes that 22 May 2019 is the 28th anniversary of the unification of Yemen, when that country emerged from a long and painful civil war; further notes that today Yemen is once again in a deep and pitiful state of conflict, having entered the fifth year of its current, tragic war; acknowledges that the most recent estimate places the death toll in excess of 70,000, of which 10,000 have died in the last five months alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; commends the work of the UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, who brought opposing sides together for agreements including on a ceasefire in the Al-Hodeidah Governate; regrets that the implementation of those agreements has been slow or non-existent; and calls on the Government to take every possible measure to support an immediate ceasefire, the flow of humanitarian aid and further peace talks in Yemen.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and its excellent Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for granting time in the Chamber for this important debate. I am pleased to see so many Members in the Chamber despite this being election day.

I congratulate the Minister for the Middle East, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), on his appointment. He knows this area well, and I wish him well. I hope he can continue the diligent work of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). I am glad to see the shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), and the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whom, of course, I met many years ago in Yemen—she was born in Yemen.

Yesterday was a special day for many Yemenis. It was Yemen Day, their national unity day: 22 May, the day on which the country’s unification took place in 1990, is a national holiday in Yemen and should have been a day of festivity, yet no one was celebrating in that troubled land. And why should they have been when their country is being destroyed and fragmented, town by town, street by street and house by house? We are in the midst of a terrible war in Yemen, and in March we passed the grim milestone of the war’s fourth anniversary.

Yemenis are losing their lives every single day. According to the Foreign Secretary, a hundred children die every day. So far, at least 70,000 children have been killed in the fighting since the war began. This will rise to 100,000 if the war ends this year, according to the United Nations. We can add to that 130,000 more who will die from starvation and disease.

Women and children are suffering and bearing the brunt of this war. A child dies every 12 minutes in Yemen, and at least 85,000 have succumbed to starvation. The all-party parliamentary group on Yemen has heard time and again from aid agencies and Yemeni organisations about the episodes of brutality, which range from the indiscriminate detonation of landmines laid by the Houthi militias to the aerial bombing of the hospital in Kitaf, northern Yemen, by coalition forces. Yemenis are literally being blown apart from the skies above and from the ground below. This must end.
An agreement was made in Stockholm in December 2018. It included three key proposals: first, the deployment of forces from Hodeidah; secondly, the exchange of prisoners; and, thirdly, humanitarian access to Taiz. In each of those areas, there has been little progress. Prisoners have not been exchanged, and talks broke down in February this year. Taiz remains in the grips of a humanitarian disaster. It is likely to have shrunk to a city of just 200,000 people, which is one third of its pre-war population of 600,000. It is as though the city of Sheffield had lost two-thirds of its population. The Taiz-Aden highway, along which much-need aid can travel, remains cut off by the fighting. The redeployment of forces from Hodeidah has been dragged out. The original deadline for troops to leave was 1 January 2019, almost half a year ago. The implementation process was only agreed in principle on 17 February, and the detailed plan of how this would take place only accepted on 15 April. This is painfully slow, while people continue to die. Finally, on 10 May, just 13 days ago, Houthi forces finally began their redeployment.

The Houthis withdrew from the key ports of Ras Isa, Hodeidah and Salif. That of course has to be welcomed by this House, and we hope it is an indication of a path to peace that both sides will travel along. Around Salif and Ras Isa, there are minefields that can now be cleared—these minefields have cost so many lives, including those of aid workers The House will be aware that about 80% of Yemen's humanitarian and other goods are imported through the port of Hodeidah. We are now at a critical juncture. There have been reports of rising violence away from Hodeidah. In the al-Dhale governorate in southern Yemen, there has been a sevenfold increase in air raids in recent months. In Hajjah, in northern Yemen, fighting near the border with Saudi Arabia has caused the displacement of 100,000 people. If the agreement is not implemented in full, and if these recent developments break down, it is likely that the peace process will irretrievably falter and come to an end, with catastrophic consequences. For the sake of the people of Yemen—for humanity—we cannot let this take place. Before it is too late, this Government and the international community must grasp this chance for peace.

On 26 February 2019, the United Nations, and the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland, hosted their annual high-level pledging conference in Geneva. Donor states pledged a total of $2.6 billion in aid to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian supplies to the people of Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates each donated $750 million. We donated £200 million, bringing the UK financial contribution since the war began to £770 million. This support is most welcome. However, Sir Mark Lowcock, the head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs—OCHA—told Members of this House recently that it has received very little of this promised funding, with only 7% of the $4.1 billion required delivered by 24 April. From Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it has received less than $240 million of that promised. Saudi Arabia's impressive Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, assured hon. Members in a robust exchange at the Saudi embassy recently that it was ready to transfer the rest of the funding. Will the Minister confirm that the rest of that funding has been transferred?

The UN reports that it has received only £30 million from the UK; will the Minister explain why we have not delivered exactly what we promised? The pledging of aid is one thing; but the promises have to be delivered on. Delays in payments are costing lives.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for his engagement with Yemen. In particular, his visit to Aden, the city of my birth, on 3 March this year showed that he cares for the people of Yemen and that he wants to see a solution to the conflict. He met members of the all-party group on Yemen on 4 February this year and hosted a meeting of the Yemen Quad in London on 27 April. All that is by marked contrast to the engagement of his predecessor, but, as he knows, much more needs to be done.

I welcome the new Secretary of State for International Development, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), with whom the all-party group worked during his previous period at the Department. These ministerial changes show that we have two friends of Yemen in key Front-Bench positions, and I hope we will hear from a third when the Minister responds to the debate.

Our message to our friends is that they need to tell our partners to stop the bombing, and to do so now. We need seriously to consider the issue of arms sales to our coalition partners. The United Kingdom has sold at least £4.7 billion-worth of arms to Saudi Arabia and a further £860 million to its coalition partners since the war began. The issue must be addressed.

We need to talk to other regional powers. We know that the Government are not friendly with Iran—they have made that clear—but they need to talk to the Iranians. Of course, Iran denies involvement in Yemen, but only last week the Houthis, backed by Iran, struck Saudi oil pipelines. This violent act had to be, and was, condemned. But just three days later, exactly a week ago, the coalition retaliated with an air strike that hit central Sana’a, killing six people, four of whom were children. This is the never-ending cycle of death that happens whenever there is an act of violence and whenever we do not engage in the peace talks. That is why we must have an immediate ceasefire.

I commend the work of Congressman Ro Khanna of the 17th congressional district of California, and Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Mike Lee of Utah and Chris Murphy of Connecticut for their passion on and commitment to this issue. The US Congress has been more active on the Yemen peace process than we have been—to be frank, in some areas it has been more active than our Government. On 4 April this year, Congress passed a resolution, which was previously passed in the Senate, calling for an end to US involvement in the Yemen war. Regrettably, the measure was vetoed by President Trump, who, as we have heard, is making a state visit to the United Kingdom from 3 June to 5 June. The House will expect the Yemen conflict to be on the agenda for his meeting with the Prime Minister; will the Minister confirm that that will be the case?

We owe a debt of gratitude to the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, for all that he has done. He has brought the parties in the war together and has initiated the trust-building measures that led to last week’s troop withdrawal. We know how busy he is, but we hope he will meet members of the all-party group when he comes to London. Members of the group have been diligent in raising awareness of the Yemen peace process
both inside and outside the House. In particular, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who sends her apologies for not being able to attend this debate, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who I see is in his place, have all worked tirelessly on this issue.

The humanitarian impacts of the peace process have been the focus of the Chairman of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who is in his place, and of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), have considered Yemen because of the plight of constituents with family members caught up in the conflict. I am so delighted to see the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) in his place. He is the only senior politician in Europe to have visited Sana'a during the conflict. From his time as one of the great Development Secretaries, he has shown himself to be a great friend of Yemen.

Yesterday afternoon, the all-party group hosted its annual Yemen Day event. We heard from charity representatives about their work in Yemen and the devastation they encounter. International humanitarian organisations continue to do so much to help the people of Yemen. These include Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, Human Rights Watch, Médecins sans Frontières, CARE International and Save the Children. I have presented the Foreign Secretary with a letter signed by 86 hon. Members from both sides of the House, as well as Members of the other place, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. It calls on him to use every tool at his disposal to push for peace in Yemen. We urge him to use our considerable influence—that great soft power that Great Britain is so good at wielding—in the region to stop the bombing. It has to remain at the top of his agenda.

On the 20th of next month, the all-party group will host an international conference on Yemen. Parliamentarians from across the world will join us in Edinburgh and Glasgow for the conference being hosted by the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife and for Glasgow Central. This follows the first international parliamentary conference for peace in Yemen held in Paris in November last year and hosted by Sébastien Nadot, a Member of the French Assembly. I extend an invitation to the Minister, who has not yet been to the key port of Hodeidah and through Taiz and al-Jubeir; and the United Arab Emirates, by Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir; and the United Arab Emirates, by Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed.

As we all know, the UK is the penholder at the Security Council, but we need to do much more. I have an idea for the Minister. Why do the Government not host a peace conference in London in the next eight weeks? Why do they not use their position on the Quad, as the penholder, to organise such a conference, as we have done in the past, to keep this right at the top of the agenda? Key parts of the agenda should be the facilitation of unimpeded access for food, fuel and medicines through the key port of Hodeidah and through Taiz and implementing the demand for an immediate nationwide ceasefire. What better way to show a commitment to peace?

In successive debates in this House, I have lamented the fact that Yemen is bleeding to death, while all we do is make speeches in this House. One cannot look at the pictures of what is happening to our fellow citizens of the world and not be overcome with emotion. As I have said many times before, I want one day to return to the country of my birth to show my children where I was born and where I spent the happiest days of my life. I want to live long enough to see Yemen peaceful, prosperous and united, free from violence and free from hate. We have reached a critical juncture in the peace process that will be of historic significance if we seize the moment. From the bottom of my heart, I beg the Minister to save the children of Yemen. I beg him to stop the bombing and the killing. I beg him to stop this war. This is in our Government’s hands.

12.9 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is right to congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on securing this debate, and on his powerful and compelling contribution. He and I have known each other for very many years, and there are not many political issues on which we agree. On the question of Yemen and Britain’s role, however, you cannot get a cigarette paper between his opinion and mine. He set out clearly for the House the profound jeopardy of what is going on in Yemen, and Britain’s complicity in it. He spoke of the tens of thousands of young Yemenis who are being radicalised, and who know where the death and destruction that rains down from the skies night after night comes from.

I welcome the new Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), to his position. He will cast a fresh pair of eyes on the problems of Yemen and Britain’s role in tackling them. I hope that he will speak out in the Government if his fresh view suggests that there are other ways of handling those problems. The purpose of my speech is to pose four questions to him, although I do not expect him to answer them from the Dispatch Box. I must apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I have already done to him, for the fact that I may not be able to stay until the end of the debate, because I have a very important engagement in my constituency.

I hope that the Minister will consider what he hears today. Britain is a beacon of light in some very dark places in the world, standing up for values that really matter to us and around the globe. On Yemen, however, I believe that Britain has lost its moral compass, and I say that with deep regret. I praise the new Foreign Secretary—he is not that new—who, immediately on taking office, went to Riyadh and Tehran. He has made it very clear that Britain’s contribution to solving the
problem is right at the top of the agenda. That was made rather easier by the profound change of sentiment towards the war after the murder of the journalist Mr Khashoggi in Turkey. The values that were displayed in that despicable act led to considerable rethinking.

I also praise Martin Griffiths, a distinguished international civil servant. As the UN special representative, he is clearly giving everything he can to finding a solution, and his energy and endeavours on the ground are helping. I pay tribute to Sir Mark Lowcock, the head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and former DFID permanent secretary, who has been equally tireless in his efforts to help. Above all, this debate is a good opportunity for the House of Commons to pay tribute to the bravery and effectiveness of humanitarian workers. Many in the sector are very young, and they often put themselves in harm’s way to assist their fellow human beings who are caught up in such jeopardy.

I went to Sana’a and Sa’dah, as the right hon. Member for Leicester East mentioned. I think I remain the only European politician who has been into Sana’a and Sa’dah. Many have been into the comparative peace of Aden in the south, but you have to go to the north, Madam Deputy Speaker, and see for yourself the extraordinary damage that the bombing has caused to infrastructure and people’s lives. When I was there, I met British aid and humanitarian workers from Oxfam, in particular, who were doing brilliant work for some of the most dispossessed and miserable people in the world.

My purpose today is to encourage the Government in their apparent change of emphasis, and to urge them to move away from their former position of complicity in what is happening in Yemen. The blockade of the country by land, sea and air with British support has effectively created a famine, which is on Britain’s conscience. It is incredibly important that the Government move away from a partisan position and towards a neutral one by seeking to achieve a ceasefire, a negotiated settlement and an end to the violence.

I echo the urgent concern that the World Food Programme raised yesterday about corrupt Houthi leaders blocking humanitarian access to civilians. The arbitrary denial of humanitarian access is an unconscionable violation of international humanitarian law, and everyone should condemn it. It is no less concerning to see an intensification of violence in Yemen, including aerial attacks by the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition. When I recently asked a Yemeni human rights defender about the well-being of her family in Sana’a, she replied that “in Yemen we are only safe by accident”.

That reflects the position of millions of men, women and children on the ground who suffer these air attacks, which I heard and saw for myself when I was in Sana’a, night after night.

Last week, on Thursday 16 May—I think the right hon. Member for Leicester East also referred to this incident—at least five children were killed and 33 civilians, including 15 children, were injured by coalition airstrikes in Sana’a. That attack was on a residential area with no military targets anywhere near—another clear violation of international humanitarian law. One of the houses belonged to journalist and writer Abdullah Al-Sabri, who lost two of his children. He and his parents are now in hospital in a critical condition. My first question to the Minister is: what conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with his Emirati and Saudi counterparts about potential violations of international humanitarian law, specifically during the airstrikes in Sana’a on 16 May?

I approach this matter more as a humanitarian than as a politician. In spite of the discomfort of this position, I have never called for an arms embargo. That is because, first, I do not think it is for politicians individually to make judgments about the sales of arms. It is for the Committees on Arms Export Controls to reach judgments in accordance with the laws that are made by this House. Secondly, quite apart from the undesirability of politicians waving their moral consciences around at the expense of high-quality jobs in the north-west of England, I think it is likely that the Saudis will continue to procure weaponry from some in Europe. Saudi Arabia is a rich country surrounded by opponents and enemies, and it will be able to secure such weapons. When it comes to protecting the people on the ground—the children in the school I saw in Sa’dah—an arms embargo from Britain will not have a direct effect, and it may not even have an indirect one.

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

Mr Mitchell: I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman is going to say, and I fully accept that my position is an uncomfortable one. The point I make to the Government is that those of us who have resisted the lure of calls for an arms embargo have done so in the hope that the Government will change their policy, as I have suggested, and make an arms embargo unnecessary. The longer the situation goes on, the more likely it is that an arms embargo will follow.

Douglas Chapman: For SNP Members, the question of an arms embargo, or stopping arms sales to Saudi Arabia, is more about messaging. I know that there are jobs at stake, but does the right hon. Gentleman accept that we have to give a special message to the people in the region? Arms sales are part of the problem, and we should be trying our very best to ensure that they do not contribute further to the existing heartache and humanitarian crisis.

Mr Mitchell: Well, I am going to come back to some aspects of that point, but I think we can agree that the case for an arms embargo is going to get stronger and stronger unless Britain moves to a position of neutrality in this dreadful conflict.

It has been just over two years since I stood in a funeral parlour in Sana’a where more than 100 people were killed by a Saudi airstrike. It is shameful—a profound political and moral failure—that Britain has been unable to convince our Saudi and Emirati allies to end the bombing of innocent Yemeni civilians. On that occasion, the aircraft that killed the mourners in the parlour came around again for a second attack after the devastation of its first strike. In my view, the Government continue to take an imbalanced approach, rightly criticising Houthi transgressions but wrongly remaining silent when our Saudi and Emirati allies commit violations. There has been no response by the British Government to the strikes on Sana’a last Thursday that killed five children—not even an expression of concern.
Quiet diplomacy with the Saudis is clearly the Government’s preferred approach, but the continued bombing of civilian areas demonstrates that this approach is simply not working. That brings me to my second question to the Minister. Does he not agree that incidents in which innocent children are killed warrant a public expression of concern and condemnation by the United Kingdom? An imbalanced approach to the conflict in Yemen risks undermining efforts to bring parties to peace negotiations. The idea that the Hadi Government hold true democratic legitimacy in Yemen is clearly fundamentally flawed. President Hadi was elected on a ballot paper with only one name on it, his term has long expired and he spends most of his time in Saudi Arabia, so I do not think that the British Government should camp on the legitimacy of President Hadi’s Government.

It is high time for the UK to correct this imbalanced approach—not just in our public statements, but in our capacity as penholder on the UN Security Council. Resolution 2216 is widely seen as imbalanced and unhelpful, yet it still underpins efforts towards a peace process. The United Kingdom should demonstrate strong leadership to unite the United Nations Security Council and ensure that Yemeni civilians do not pay the price for increased tension between the US and Iran, which threatens to undermine Security Council unity on Yemen.

Let me be clear: I am no apologist for the Houthis. Violations are being committed by all parties to the conflict and all violations should be condemned, but it is the Saudi and United Arab Emirates-led coalition that the UK is backing, and this is where we can yield serious influence in order to prevent needless civilian casualties and push for revitalised peace negotiations. That brings me to my third question. Does the Minister agree that the UK should urgently lead action at the UN Security Council to call for a nationwide ceasefire and a swift move to inclusive peace negotiations?

The United Kingdom can play an important role supporting impartial investigations of violations by all sides in Yemen, and promoting accountability for perpetrators. Relying on the Saudi-led coalition’s Joint Incidents Assessment Team to conduct credible investigations into incidents is like trusting children to mark their own homework, and it simply will not carry any international credibility. That brings me to my fourth—and the Minister will be relieved to hear—final question. Does he agree that we need a strengthened UN mechanism for investigating human rights violations in Yemen, and that the UK should support the creation of a commission of inquiry in September’s session of the Human Rights Council at the UN, so that a truly independent body is established with a strong mandate to collect and preserve evidence of possible war crimes and other violations of international law?

As I said at the outset, Britain needs to be seen at the United Nations as a force for the constructive conclusion of these dreadful events in Yemen, moving to a comprehensive ceasefire on the ground and meaningful peace negotiations at all levels in Yemeni society. Britain’s reputation at the United Nations is challenged at the moment, and this situation is one part of that. The Minister will have noticed that only six countries supported Britain on last night’s vote in respect of the Chagos Islands, which was a very significant change of tone by the UN. He will also be aware that Britain was unable to procure, for the first time since 1947, the election of a judge to the International Court of Justice—a position formerly held by the highly respected jurist Sir Christopher Greenwood.

In spite of the quite outstanding work that the current British permanent representative to the UN, Dame Karen Pierce, undoubtedly carries out, our reputation is damaged. If we are to hold the role of penholder on Yemen, we owe it to the United Nations and the international community to be in a far more a neutral position. It is unsatisfactory that the Russians and the Scandinavian countries had to amend the British-drafted presidential statement on these matters. For as long as we are maintaining the planes that are used for the bombing runs, supplying the armaments and advising the targeting cell in Riyadh, Britain’s complicity is unavoidable. Britain’s role is also still quite extraordinarily confused. When I was in Sa’dah, I had the opportunity to meet the very brave unit that was demining and defusing armaments, some of which were British. The unit was largely paid for by British taxpayers’ money and led by a former British major. That seems to put the confusion of the matter in very clear sight indeed.

I want to end with the words of the chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, Radhya Al-Mutawakel, who visited Britain recently and met the Foreign Secretary and the Chair of the International Development Committee. She is a very powerful and independent Yemeni voice on what is happening, and she said:

“Since March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates…have led a coalition of countries in a military campaign against…rebels in Yemen. As documented by multiple human rights organizations as well as the UN, the Saudi/UAE-led Coalition has consistently attacked civilians and critical civilian infrastructure—including hospitals, schools, school children, weddings, farms, and water wells—in violation of the laws of war…. Four years into the conflict, around 20,000 Yemeni civilians have been killed or wounded and half the population—14 million people—are at risk of famine, according to the UN. Other estimates, however, range much higher: ACLED”—

the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project—

“has recorded over 50,000 reported deaths as a direct result of the fighting, and according to Save the Children, 85,000 children may have died of hunger and preventable disease.”

That is the situation. Britain’s position needs to move and intensify, away from what it was, to a new place.

12.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has shown great leadership in speaking up on the Yemen issue. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz)—my good friend—who led the debate, for his very long-standing work on Yemen and for his role, with others, in the all-party parliamentary group. I echo his thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I also welcome the new Minister to his post, as Minister both in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and in the Department for International Development, and I look forward to working closely with him in that capacity—on Yemen specifically, on the broader responsibilities he has for the middle east and north Africa, and on his important work on global health.

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe has been well described already and is thankfully now widely known about. I echo what my right hon. Friend the
Member for Leicester East said about the pledging conference that was held in February. The head of OCHA, the UN humanitarian relief agency, Mark Lowcock—to whom I also pay tribute—has pointed out that we face an 80% gap in terms of the funds that were pledged in February. I support the question that my right hon. Friend put to the Minister. It is important that the House is updated today on what the United Kingdom is doing to press the donors who pledged funds to deliver those funds, to assist the humanitarian relief effort.

We know that millions in Yemen face malnutrition. Save the Children, in its excellent briefing for the debate, estimates that 85,000 children under the age of five may have already died from extreme hunger or disease during this conflict—85,000 children under the age of five. We know about the scourge of preventable diseases. We have seen a recent increase in cases of cholera—it is estimated that around 1,000 children a day are contracting cholera—and the emergence for the first time in this crisis of swine flu in Yemen.

We also know that the breakdown of public services in general, and health services in particular, has a major and disproportionate effect on women, and in particular, their access to maternal healthcare and family planning services. I want to talk a little bit about restrictions on access for humanitarian aid, because it lies at the heart of the humanitarian crisis that Yemen faces.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. What is happening in Yemen is truly heartbreaking, and it has rightly been described by many as the largest humanitarian crisis on our planet. In his highly considered and expert opinion, what key event should occur to allow aid to pass through the port of Hodeidah?

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He has anticipated something that I am about to say, so I will say it now. If implemented, the Stockholm agreement, about which I will say a little more later, is crucial to achieving that. While we have seen fragile progress in that regard, were that agreement to collapse, the consequences could be disastrous. The International Rescue Committee’s country director in Yemen, Frank McManus, says that the cost of the deal collapsing “cannot be overstated”, that almost 10 million people are “on the brink” of starvation in Yemen and that fighting in Hodeidah and disruptions to imports through the port “could propel the country into a full-fledged famine.” That is why implementation of the Stockholm agreement is so important.

The focus on Hodeidah is understandable, but there are challenges elsewhere in Yemen. The International Rescue Committee tells us that in Aden port, cargo is being delayed for months due to five different departments of the authorities there having to approve customs clearance, and in the north—the Houthi-controlled area—there are delays in getting the Houthis to agree to aid operations and increasing efforts by the Houthis to influence where aid is delivered to.

Stockholm is a hugely welcome development, but as both my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield pointed out, progress is fragile. As we have heard, last week we saw Houthi attacks on the oil export pipeline linking eastern and western Saudi Arabia, then a retaliatory strike by the Saudi-led coalition in Sana’a and further clashes in Hodeidah. The Yemen Data Project points out that the latest figures from April marked a record monthly low in the number of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. Despite that, the number of civilian casualties from airstrikes in April was 131, which was up from the previous month.

I want to emphasise, as the two previous speakers have, the vital role of the UN special envoy and to welcome the diplomatic leadership of the United Kingdom, which I have no doubt has contributed to the progress we have seen in recent days, with the Houthis finally agreeing to redeployment from Hodeidah, Ras Isa and Salif.

Let me comment briefly on the wider regional context. We are seeing greater tension between the United States and Iran. Iranian links to the Houthis are well documented, but this rising tension makes it even more important for the United Kingdom, in our role as penholder, to retain an absolute focus on Yemen and its people. It would be a further risk to the prospects of peace if Yemen were simply seen through the lens of Iran versus the west. That is why, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield rightly said, we should be clear in calling out both sides for any alleged violations of international humanitarian law. I endorse his call for an independent commission of inquiry to be established through the UN Human Rights Council, and I hope the UK Government will support that.

Last year, the UN group of experts on Yemen said: “There is little evidence of any attempt by parties to the conflict to minimize civilian casualties.” We have heard about the Houthis’ appalling and widespread use of landmines, which are laid right up the western coast of Yemen, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries and inhibiting access for humanitarian aid. I thank Human Rights Watch for the excellent work it has done in exposing the Houthis for their use of landmines.

Looking at the other side in the conflict, the Yemen Data Project points out that there have been almost 19,000 air raids by the Saudi-led coalition during the conflict. That is one air raid every 102 minutes. In March this year, five children were killed in a Saudi-led coalition attack on a hospital in Kitaf supported by Save the Children. At the time, the Government said that the UK had “raised this matter with the Saudi-led Coalition, who have announced an investigation.”

My understanding is that no public statement has yet been made by the coalition about an investigation, and neither the hospital nor the families have been contacted. Can the Minister update the House—ideally in responding to the debate, but if necessary after it—on any progress towards a genuine investigation into that attack, which resulted in the deaths of five children in March at a Save the Children-supported hospital?

Let me comment briefly on the issue of child soldiers. There is huge concern about the number of children who have been recruited into this conflict, mostly by the Houthis. It is well documented and must be condemned, but there are also reports that children have been recruited by the Saudi-led coalition. Can the Minister comment
on that? Yesterday I had the opportunity, as others did, to meet the Yemeni Minister of Information. He raised with me the Houthis' use of child soldiers, and I agreed with him entirely in his condemnation. I asked him about allegations of there being child soldiers on the Government side, and he said there were none. I would be interested to hear the UK Government's assessment of whether that is actually the case.

Let me say a little more about what needs to happen with the peace process, and in particular the importance of peace-building efforts that engage Yemeni society, empower women, give a voice to young people and reach local community organisations. As we have heard, women and children have borne the brunt of this crisis. We have a responsibility to put women and children at the heart of efforts to build peace in Yemen. In the financial year that just finished, £7 million of the conflict, stability and security fund was spent on stabilisation and peace building in Yemen. What plans do the Government have to scale up support for peace building and to include as part of that engaging with Yemeni civil society, and especially women, young people and marginalised groups?

Let me comment briefly on the issue of UK arms, because I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East that we need to see a major rethink. This is the only issue in the speech of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield with which I disagree. I respect his point of view, but I do disagree, not least because our role of arms has contributed to the issues that have so eloquently described as our not being seen as a neutral player diplomatically. I also feel that the example of the arms that are being used in Yemen has undermined the claim, which is still made by the British Government, that we have the most rigorous arms export control regime in the world. I think it is now, sadly, very difficult to justify that claim, so I urge the Government to think again. They should follow the example of a number of European countries, including Germany, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East rightly said, the resolutions that were passed with cross-party support—bipartisan support—both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate in the United States.

An important element in our debates on Yemen is the Yemeni diaspora here in our own country. It has been an honour for me over the last three or four years to get to know the Liverpool Yemeni community, and we formed the Liverpool Friends of Yemen to enable people across the city to show solidarity with the people of Yemen. I was pleased to join the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), at an excellent event in Birmingham in March, which engaged with the Yemeni diaspora from across the country but particularly from the west midlands. I am very pleased that we have formed the Labour Friends of Yemen, of which I am the chair. May I ask the Minister to give an undertaking when he responds that when Martin Griffiths is next available in the United Kingdom, he could meet representatives of the Yemeni diaspora so that their voice can be heard as part of his efforts to build peace in that country?

I shall finish by joining in the tributes paid by both my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield to the amazing, brave work that is done by human rights organisations and humanitarian organisations on the ground in these dangerous circumstances in Yemen. I welcome the leadership the Foreign Secretary has shown since he took the post, and in particular the support of the United Kingdom for the efforts at the UN of the special envoy, Martin Griffiths.

As the motion sets out very clearly and very powerfully, what is needed now for Yemen is a nationwide ceasefire. The whole country needs a ceasefire. We then need a peace process that, yes of course engages the combatants, but also engages civilians and civil society. We need a sense that there will be justice for victims on all sides in this conflict. Perhaps most importantly of all—I hope the Minister can give this commitment today—we need to demonstrate that the United Kingdom's commitment to Yemen is not just during this conflict, but will be a long-term commitment to rebuild a country that was always poor and always faced many challenges, but one that has come close to destruction because of this conflict.

12.43 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Let me start by saying how pleased I am that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has brought forward this debate, and how pleased I am to participate in it and follow what he has said. I think we all agreed with his feelings, which he set out very clearly and quite emotionally in his speech, for the people of Yemen, who have suffered so tremendously. I thought his description of that was very powerful indeed. I may be only the fourth speaker in this debate, but the three speeches before mine have covered so much of the ground and so many of the points that there are only a few additional points I want to comment on.

First, I think it is a cause for celebration that we do have the outlines of a truce. We should take great comfort from that. I know it is just the outlines and that it could always go further than that, but in this sort of conflict one has to grab whatever one can to try to keep some sanity in the whole process. The peace process is now more akin to a mediation than to a conference set up to tell the Yemenis what to do. In any mediation, the system only works if there are two people who are genuinely prepared to sit down and talk to each other. Only then can the essence of a mediation, which is for the participants to agree and to bring out themselves the solution to the problem, actually come through. That is a very important point to bear in mind, including for the role the UK may want to play.

A lot more work needs to be done on the triggers that can bring two warring sides to the realisation that they need to come together to agree a peace. I do not think we have done enough work on that internationally. We have done a lot of work on conferences that can take place to cover these issues, but I do not think that they are as important as trying to get the people themselves to agree. The triggers may be very different for different conflicts. The trigger may be the crisis of hunger in the country. The triggers may be external, such as stopping arms sales, in which case we need to stop arms sales to both parties. There may be a whole range of things that we need to look at to make sure that we can really get to grips with this.

It is worth remembering that this whole war started as a result of a Houthi rebel insurgency. I know that some speakers have particularly said that they need to
condemn and we all need to condemn the faults on both sides. However, the Houthis are a very unsavoury group of people. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) raised the issue of boy soldiers. Whether the Saudis are also generating boy soldiers is a separate issue, but we know that the Houthis are employing boy soldiers, and that has to stop because it is a great attack on everything that we all believe in. We must bear in mind that they killed Saleh, the former Prime Minister, and the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned landmines as well.

Mr Mitchell: Part of trying to move the Government to a better place is to accept that there are no good people in this conflict. My hon. Friend mentions the murder by the Houthis of Ali Abdullah Saleh, but the Saudis murdered al-Sammad, who was the President of the Houthis. I had met him, and he was a dove who wanted to negotiate. Part of moving the Government’s mindset is just to accept that there are no good people in this, and that includes the Houthis and the Saudis.

John Howell: I have a great deal of sympathy with that statement, but I am trying to make sure that we achieve some sort of balance from our perspective when we look at the situation there. It should not be seen solely as a Saudi exercise in the bombing and intimidation of the Yemeni people; it started as a result of a particularly unsavoury group of people among the Houthis. I cannot remember who mentioned it, but I think the drone attack on the Riyadh pumping stations is very important because sources from the region state very clearly—very clearly—that this was inspired and paid for by Iran and Hezbollah. I think that is really unchallengeable and we would be unable to go against it, and I want to come back to that in a minute.

First, however, let me comment on the scale of the humanitarian crisis, which I think could be a trigger for getting the sides to agree. Some 71% of the population are living in extreme poverty—an enormous number—and 84% are malnourished. The loss in economic output from the country is enormous at something close to $700 billion, which is a phenomenal amount. UNICEF has estimated that more than 12 million children are in desperate need, and the number of internally displaced people is also large and must be considered.

I completely agree that in this case it is not good enough just to pledge aid, although the almost three quarters of billion pounds that we have pledged should not be sneezed at. We must, however, keep the pressure on and ensure that that money is paid, and used in a good way, in particular to help children in that area. The British Government are helping with the creation of the UN civilian co-ordinator in the area, which is a good thing for us to be involved with.

Let me return to my earlier point about Iran. It is true that we do not have the sort of relationship with Iran that we have with Saudi Arabia, but we are not the United States. We have a better relationship with Iran than the United States does—it would be impossible to have a worse one—and we should use that to talk to the Iranians about the geopolitical situation. In addition to what is happening in Yemen, a geopolitical discussion between Iran and Saudi Arabia is being played out, and I view this as a proxy war that is taking place against Iran.

As I said, the attacks on the Riyadh pumping stations appear to have come from drones that were supplied by Iran through Hezbollah.

Will the Minister redouble his efforts in negotiating with Iran, so as to take this forward in a positive way? We must ensure that as part of the complicated discussions that must now take place between the Houthis and the internationally backed Yemeni Government, and between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we try to find a trigger point that could solve this conflict.

12.52 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). He raised important points about the Houthis, which I will come to in a moment. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate. Even though we in this country are obsessed with Brexit, and with who might be Prime Minister in three days’ time, other important issues deserve our attention. The ongoing failed state that is Yemen is a major threat not just to its neighbouring countries but to the whole world, and it could be the powder keg that sparks a wider conflagration.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because a year ago I went to Saudi Arabia and visited Najran. I saw buildings, a school, and a power plant that had suffered extensive damage from missiles fired into Saudi Arabia from Yemen by the Houthis. For those in Saudi Arabia, this conflict is seen as a threat to their state.

Let me add a little history to this debate. First, this conflict is not just between the internationally recognised and living in exile President Hadi and the Houthis, because Yemen has other conflicts within it. Since 2009, there has been an insurgency by the Southern Movement—its Arabic name is al-Hirak—and an area in the south of Yemen is controlled by tribal groups and militias, and has a transitional council that is supported, ironically, by the United Arab Emirates. Everybody talks about Saudi Arabia, but the UAE is also a key player within the internationally supported and recognised coalition that is led by Saudi Arabia. The UAE also has strong views about resisting all forms of influence in the Arab world from Iran and what it perceives to be its proxies.

Secondly, elements in the south of Yemen are linked to al-Qaeda, and there are real dangers to that happening in any failed state. We have seen in Afghanistan, Somalia and Libya that if there is no state with power, the vacuum is filled by non-state actors, including extremists who are prepared to act totally ruthlessly, and who have no principles or regard for international law or what their international partners think. That is what we could have in Yemen—indeed, we already have it, but it could be much worse.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) spoke about having a new approach to whether we should continue to recognise President Hadi, given that he does not have any real locus within Yemen. That is a big issue and a fundamental question, because if there are to be talks, and if any real progress following the Stockholm agreement is to be made, the voices from the south of Yemen must also be heard. Such talks would not involve just the backers of President Hadi and of the Houthis, but other voices from within Yemen.
Yemen is a complicated country with a complicated history. There were once two Yemens, and with the end of the cold war they became one. Now we seem to have more than two, as there are several disparate groupings. Since last year there has been some hope—the efforts of Martin Griffiths have been referred to so I will not repeat them. There was an agreement to remove forces from Hodeidah and to have a neutral policing operation in the city, but we have not had that. The unilateral claim of withdrawal by the Houthis has been disputed by some people. We have also seen that even if the problem of the port of Hodeidah is somehow solved, that does not necessarily mean that the starving people in Yemen will be any better off.

The World Food Programme, which supplies food aid to 12 million people in Yemen, stated on Monday that it is thinking of suspending its operations in certain areas that are controlled by the Houthis. Of those 12 million people, 9 million are in Houthi-controlled areas, and the World Food Programme referred to a series of problems, including intimidation, corruption, extortion, insecurity and fighting, that are presenting great difficulties in getting that aid through. The Houthis are effectively taxing and extorting. Food and other aid is not getting through to the poor people, because these organisations are using their power to prevent it. That absolute scandal deserves wider publicity.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is very experienced. He is a distinguished former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee and his presence for this debate is extremely important. I remain puzzled, however, so perhaps he can help me with his vast knowledge of international affairs. The coalition admits that it cannot win the bombing war and the Houthis cannot win the war. People are starving. From looking at this problem from the outside, with a lot of knowledge about the tribal nature of Yemen, what does he think is stopping everyone saying that this has to end?

Mike Gapes: In short, it is because the conflict has become a proxy. The Houthis are perceived by a large number of countries in the Arab world to be either proxies or puppets of the Iranian regime. I do not think that that is absolutely an accurate description, but it is clear that the Iranians are arming the Houthis. I have seen the remains of missiles with Iranian markings on, which were on display in Najran, and the Saudis have a lot of such material. Nevertheless, the reality is that this is an internal conflict that outside countries are exploiting.

The problem we have is that in the past few days the United States has decided to send a carrier group into the region. The US has always had aircraft carriers in the region. In 2000, flying with the Defence Committee, I landed on the deck of the USS John C Stennis, named after the Chairman of the US Senate Defence select committee. Bruce George, the then Chairman of our Defence Committee, was hoping that the Ministry of Defence would do the same, but that never transpired. We landed, with the wire, on the deck. This aircraft carrier was in the Gulf of Hormuz. We could see all the aircraft movements in Iran up to the horizon from the bridge of the vessel. The US is reinforcing its military capability with carriers in the region because of its tensions with Iran. I do not want to be diverted on to issues relating to the joint comprehensive plan of action, the Iranian nuclear programme and so on, but there is the potential for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to get America into a regional conflict with Iran.

There are good reasons to be critical of Iran: internally, it has the highest number of executions of any country in the whole world apart from China—much more than Saudi Arabia, actually—its bad behaviour in Syria; its support for Hezbollah; its consistent attempts over decades to undermine any prospect of a middle east peace process; and what it is doing in Yemen. At the same time, the Arab League has just sent an invitation from the Saudi Government to an emergency Arab summit on 30 May in Mecca. The terms of the invitation refer to “recent aggression”, which refers to the attacks on the two Saudi oil tankers off the UAE coast. No one has claimed responsibility. Blame has not yet been attributed, but the assumption is that that was done by either Houthis, people from Iraq or, potentially, those from Iran as part of the proxy regional conflict.

A year ago, as our plane was flying back from Najran and was about to land in Riyadh, there was an alert. We could see, from a distance of probably just a few miles away, an incoming missile fired into Riyadh airport. When attacks start on oil tankers and pipelines, and missiles are fired into airports as planes are landing, that gets into the mindset of the Saudis. If we are to get peace and to get the Saudis out of this conflict that the then Defence Minister, now the Crown Prince, got them into in 2015—I am sure they never thought that four years later they would be sucked into it in such a manner, and I am sure they would like a way out—the problem, as has been said, is that the Houthis also have to want a way out. However, they are doing very well out of taxing the aid that comes in, controlling the ports and all the rest of it. They are not a big group. As a percentage of Yemen’s total population they are a very small group, but they have maximum power and leverage at this time.

I do not have a message of easy solutions. I know it is fashionable for some people to say, “Well, if we stop supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, there would be no conflict in Yemen.” No one who has spoken in this debate has said that, but I have seen leaflets going out from groups such as the Stop the War Coalition that seem to imply that that is the reality. The reality is that we must use our position in the United Nations, as we have been. We must back up Martin Griffiths and his efforts. We must try, even though it is difficult, to talk to the Iranians and say, “This pattern of bad behaviour is not helpful to you if you want us to stop the pressure for more sanctions.” We also need to find ways to get support internally in Yemen for a dialogue between all groups. I flag up the fact that it is not just about the Houthis and Hadi’s Government. There are other factors in Yemen and they all have to be brought together.

1.7 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow so many distinguished gentlemen who are very knowledgeable about Yemen, led of course by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is originally from Yemen. I do not pretend to be an expert on Yemen, but for the reasons that have been very ably set out, I have become increasingly interested in Yemen following my original interest in the Syrian area. I do
feel, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) just told us, that the powder keg worry is very real, which was why I wanted to take part in the debate. I will, however, confine my remarks to the plight of civilians in Yemen, especially children. It is important that we focus on what it is really like to be a child in Yemen today.

As we have heard, it is now four years since hostilities escalated in Yemen, and the suffering of millions of children and their families has grown worse and worse. Millions of Yemenis are malnourished, with an estimated 85,000 children under five—that is as many people as I represent in my constituency—who may already have died from hunger or famine. About 360,000 children under five are currently suffering from severe acute malnutrition for which they require treatment. Those are eye-watering numbers and it is important that we stop and try to imagine the level of suffering, which has been exacerbated by the denial of access to humanitarian and commercial goods, the destruction and shut-down of much of the country’s medical and educational facilities, mass cholera and diphtheria outbreaks, and almost four years of still-escalating conflict.

The situation is estimated to be causing a child to die every 10 minutes—that was what I read, although the right hon. Member for Leicester East said it was every 12 minutes—from a completely preventable cause. It should be said that because there is so little infrastructure and because, in certain areas, so little notice is taken of who is dying and what is happening to them, the figure could be much higher. More than half of all health facilities are closed or only partially functioning. Preventable diseases are flourishing, with cholera cases increasing in recent weeks. About 1,000 children are being infected with cholera every day. In the last two weeks of March, 40,000 children contracted cholera.

Yemen has seen the emergence of swine flu for the first time. That is not something to be dismissed, because those of us who got swine flu when we had the outbreak in Britain know just how difficult that disease can be, particularly for the young. My daughter was desperately ill with swine flu. We need to think back only to what happened to a weakened population after a serious conflict of our own, the first world war, to know what flu in its worst state can do widely across weakened populations.

Long-term conflict has other implications. In the worst-affected areas of Hodeidah, only one in three children go to school and less than a quarter of the populations. Members have mentioned this—fill the void that schools should be taking up in children’s lives. It also stores up a very real problem for the future, as we will not have educated a whole generation of Yemenis.

In 2018, a fifth of all armed violence casualties were children and nearly half those casualties were from airstrikes. Several hon. Members have mentioned that two months ago, a hospital in Kitaf was bombed. Five children were killed; the youngest was eight. This was almost certainly an airstrike and it was not an isolated incident. It is comprehensively estimated that a fifth of all armed casualties are child casualties.

Since the escalation of the conflict in March 2015, the Yemen Data Project has counted around 19,000 air raids—one every 102 minutes for almost four years. Approximately half the known targets have been against non-military sites, which usually include places where civilians are, such as hospitals, schools, markets, factories and farms. While the ceasefire in the port means that the situation is perhaps better than it was, there has been an increase in violence in other parts of the country. Last week, four more children were killed by an airstrike in Sana’a. Across the country, children continue to be killed and maimed by shelling and mines.

We must make sure that there is humanitarian access into Yemen so that aid and commercial goods, including food, medicine and fuel, get into the country and to everyone who needs it. Children do not ask to be involved in these conflicts, and we should do everything we can to ensure that they get the protection that they need. It is our obligation to protect them.

The Stockholm agreement was the first diplomatic breakthrough and the first real source of hope. Of course, the agreement needs to be implemented, as many people have said across the House, so that the UN can continue to conduct its role in monitoring and facilitating it. I praise the Secretary of State and the new Minister for the interest that they are taking in this region and for the work that they are doing. I look forward to hearing about the Minister’s plans later this afternoon.

It is simply not acceptable that children face these risks. Charities and doctors do their best to pick up the pieces, but it is incumbent on Governments around the world to prevent the atrocities from happening in the first place. The UK Government have taken a welcome first step by promising to review our protection of civilians strategy—something that has been widely called for across Parliament and by the UN. Updating the strategy and urging our allies to follow suit presents an opportunity to consider the changing nature of warfare. As conflict inevitably becomes more complex and more urban, we must update our policies, practice and global norms to protect civilians. Of course, terrorists may not read that review, but we still must continue to take the lead on it and encourage our allies to follow suit. We can start by introducing new measures to protect children, such as ending the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons in populated areas. More than that, we must champion the protection of children globally, demanding that the UN and our allies do more to uphold the international rules-based system.

1.15 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The debate on Yemen seems to focus very much on arms sales, and it is an important debate that raises many ethical problems, some of which are rather complex. However, the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), I think that denying sales to Saudi may not achieve a great deal because it will simply buy the bombs from elsewhere. I would rather have our people in there targeting cells to minimise casualties.

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). She makes a very important point about ensuring that targeting in built-up areas is given an intense priority because of the potential for
civilians. As I am sure she knows, when we were running the ISIS campaign, if there were any civilian casualties, even in ISIS territory, we simply could not drop a bomb. For Saudi, it may be that those restrictions on battle damage assessment—BDA, as it is known in the military world—are somewhat looser or perhaps they justify it by going after particular individuals. There is an issue over BDA and the levels of BDA allowed by Saudi as opposed to other people.

I do not intend to talk for long, but I want to raise a few issues about the internal dynamics in Yemen and to ask questions of the Minister, in part because I am curious about the subject and covered it a bit in a previous employment. For me, the most concerning issue is the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman in the south and east of Yemen. All three countries are important allies of ours. I fear that those proxy dynamics are being played out through tribal forces in Hadramaut and Mahra. A worsening conflict between those major states will increase civilian casualties in formerly more peaceful parts of the country, such as Mukalla, Hadramaut and Mahra. It will also worsen the dynamic between our allies—the Saudis, the UAE and especially the Omanis—and Iran. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was absolutely right when he said that we should not just see this through the prism of a proxy war. Unfortunately, that is an important part of great power politics. Clearly, that proxy battle, as we are seeing with the Houthis, and the dynamic between the Houthis and the Saudis in other parts of the country—around Sana’a and in the major ports—is driving the civilian casualties. Solving the civilian crisis and solving the great power politics around Yemen are very much one and the same thing.

I am concerned about the Iranian dynamic and about the Saudi desire to put a pipeline through parts of Yemen when there is no central Government to negotiate on behalf of the tribes in Hadramaut and Mahra provinces. I would like to hear what the Minister thinks we can do to use our limited influence—we should remind ourselves that our influence is limited—in certain parts of the country for stabilisation. I ask that for a specific reason: about five years ago, we had a plan—not for all of Yemen, but the MOD and other bits of Government put together a plan for the south and east of Yemen. I vaguely know about it because I was very vaguely involved in it. It was a good plan, which looked at linking up a bit of military support with peace-building measures, a bit of development, a bit of media work, education work and a clean-up along the coastline, because the place was a bit messy. All these things were designed to stabilise south and east Yemen to prevent the Iranian smuggling routes of drugs and weapons into Yemen that were fuelling the conflict, especially from Mukalla. I cannot quite remember when, but about 15 or 18 months ago, the UAE special forces cleared out Mukalla—the Saudis came in as well—with the local tribes. I understand from my contacts with the local tribes, especially in the Mahra tribal federations, that they have, to a certain extent, welcomed outside forces, because they have helped to clean out al-Qaeda. Yemenis fear UAE attempts to cut off Aden from the rest of the country. The tribes fear that the Saudis are simply going to put a pipeline through eastern Yemen and not ask too many questions. The Omanis, who may not be our most powerful ally in that part of the world, but are one of our best allies, fear that they are being dragged into a proxy conflict with Saudi tribal federation groups and the UAE.

I am very keen to hear from the Minister how our influence is being played out, either locally or in our diplomatic relationships here and elsewhere, to ensure that our allies do not come to blows, and that they and we can be part of a solution that seeks to stabilise. Specifically in Hadramaut and Mahra, that would look like engaging a broader tribal federation or tribal council—I think in Afghanistan it is called a Loya Jirga, but I cannot remember what the Yemeni version is called. There should be a wider tribal federation plan than the one that exists at the moment, whereby some tribes accept Omani support and some accept Saudi support. I know that I am asking some detailed questions, but very often the devil is in the detail with these things. If the Government could say what they are doing as an honest broker between our allies, I would really appreciate it.

Will the Minister also say whether there is a new joined-up strategy to replace the at least partial joined-up strategy that was attempted a few years ago, which for various internal governmental and agency reasons sadly never saw the light of day? I regret that because it was a decent plan. Are the Government concerned about the posture of the UAE in Aden? Are they concerned about the posture of Saudi in other parts of the country and about whether it wants a more permanent presence in Yemen? If it does, what would that mean for the delicate internal dynamics in that country?

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP):
I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and other experienced Members around the Chamber for their comments. There is obviously a huge amount of knowledge about Yemen in the House. I hope the Minister is in a position to listen to the comments that have been made today and to act on the good suggestions that we have heard.

My starting point is that the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the greatest tragedies of our time. Can the UK do more to alleviate the dreadful humanitarian situation in that country and that region?

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting this debate in Yemen Week. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on securing the debate and on the assiduous way in which he has pursued such a complex issue through the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, which he chairs with the support of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who sadly cannot be with us as she is on manoeuvres elsewhere. All Members share their passion for peace and prosperity in Yemen, both in the short term and in respect of its long-term success.

The pressure that the APPG has brought to bear over the past four years has been something to behold, particularly the number of parliamentary questions that have been put down by our members and the number of early-day motions that have detailed every twist and turn of the process. As the bombs have rained down on the people of Yemen; as food, water and
Indeed, any Government to leave to those who come
That is a dreadful legacy for any Foreign Secretary and,
international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes."
International’s extensive and credible report, which has
path to peace and stability.
arms sales to Saudi Arabia until Yemen is firmly on a
Government who have the power to stop or suspend
through to the most senior levels of our Government—a
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W atch and Rights Watch UK are supporting a legal
reputation. When Amnesty International, Human Rights
the Foreign Secretary thinks it is; it is a blot on our
The Guardian
claimed at the end of March that it would be ‘morally bankrupt’
with this policy, the UK is now “out of step” with the
I believe that those exports still play a significant negative
role in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. By continuing
with this policy, the UK is now “out of step” with the
rest of the EU member states and its position is
“becoming ever more absurd, to the point where Jeremy Hunt
claimed at the end of March that it would be ‘morally bankrupt’
ot to sell weapons to the Saudis.”
So wrote Anna Stavrianakis in a recent article for
The Guardian.
Agreeing licences for arms sales is not the good news
the Foreign Secretary thinks it is; it is a blot on our
reputation. When Amnesty International, Human Rights
Watch and Rights Watch UK are supporting a legal
appeal brought by the Campaign Against Arms Trade,
and when we know that many of our European counter-
parts have not fallen into the arms trade trap, it is clear
that a serious message on arms sales is not getting
through to the most senior levels of our Government—a
Government who have the power to stop or suspend
arms sales to Saudi Arabia until Yemen is firmly on a
path to peace and stability.
There is an even stronger warning from Amnesty
International’s extensive and credible report, which has
“demonstrated that British-made weapons have been repeatedly
used—and continue to be used—to commit serious violations of
international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes.”
That is a dreadful legacy for any Foreign Secretary and,
indeed, any Government to leave to those who come
after them. Someone, someday will have to be around to
clear up the mess that has been left behind.
The Netherlands, the Flemish part of Belgium and
Greece have all suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia,
and Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland have put
restrictive measures on exports to Saudi Arabia. In the
aftermath of the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi,
several EU states announced that they would suspend
arms sales to Saudi Arabia, including Germany, Norway,
Finland and Denmark. I hope that the Minister accepts
in his response that many of the countries I have just
mentioned are our friends and allies. Why have they
seen the light, and why is the UK out of step with them?
The Government have said many times that they are
friends with the Saudi regime and that they have influence
in the region. In a good friendship, sometimes one has
to be a critical friend. I therefore hope that the Minister
will listen to the views that have been expressed in this
House and explain to his Saudi counterparts that many
Members of the House are unhappy with the arms sales
and the way in which British arms are being deployed
by Saudi Arabia in Yemen.
Many hon. Members have highlighted the dreadful
humanitarian crisis affecting Yemen. Women and children
are on the frontline of that crisis. Their difficulties
have been well documented by UNICEF, Oxfam, Save
the Children, Islamic Relief and the Red Cross. Some
of the statistics that we read are chilling: 80% of Yemenis
are in need of humanitarian aid; 50% of children between
six months and five years old are chronically malnourished;
half the population, or 16 million people, wake up every
day hungry; there have been, to date, 17,000 UN-
documented civilian casualties, 10,000 of which are
attributed to Saudi-led coalition assaults; 85,000 children
have died of starvation; and 20 million people do not
know where their food will come from in the next week.
Those are just numbers, and it is easy for them to trip
off our tongues as Members of Parliament, but the
House must recognise the lives, the families, the education
and the wellbeing of those who lie behind them. While
we are the fifth-largest contributor to aid to Yemen,
which is to be welcomed, we are the second-biggest
arms exporter to Saudi Arabia. It might be a start if the
those two areas were transposed and we started putting
more into aid and much less into arms sales—if, indeed,
we are to have arms sales at all.
The peace process is of course where much of our
hope for the future lies. As I said, I think the whole
House is united in our support for the work of Martin
Griffiths and Sir Mark Lowcock, whom many hon.
Members have met in recent months. The UK is the
penholder for Yemen in the UN, which means that we
have a special role—a significant responsibility to the
people of Yemen to help to lead them to a situation
where they live in a peaceful and prosperous country.
We support UN resolutions 2451 and 2452. I thank the
Foreign Secretary for travelling to Stockholm to engage
in these peace talks, but we need to do more. I also
thank the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for
North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), for everything
that he did in this area and the way that he kept
Members informed. I hope that the new Minister will
step seamlessly into his shoes and do an equally good
job.
There are five areas critical to peace where the UK
could do more. We need to do much more to apply
pressure to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates
to bring about an end to this conflict and to secure
peace and a lasting ceasefire. The special relationship must be made to work towards peace and stability. I would like to hear the Minister’s views on how he is working towards that. We ask that the UK stops, or at least suspends, arms sales to give a really strong signal that we are serious about a ceasefire and bringing peace to the region. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made a good point about allowing us to find some space to rethink what our position is on arms sales. We should send a message that we want to bring peace and stability to the region. This is not a long-term position that the Government need to adopt; we just need to provide a bit of space to make sure that progress can be made.

Having a diplomatic presence in Sana’a would give a clear message that we are serious about the long-term future of the country and help to focus the international efforts to bring about an immediate and lasting ceasefire. I do not know if there are any plans to do that or if it has already been done, but it would send a very strong message to people on the ground that the UK was playing a major part and respecting our penholder status.

I hope that we can listen a lot more to the people of Yemen on the ground—particularly women—who have a crucial role to play in the future of their own country. The solutions must be found by the people of Yemen and not just done to the people of Yemen. I hope to hear from the Minister about how he would hope to encourage that sense of inclusion across communities and groups that currently operate in Yemen. I look forward to his response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I recognise that the Front Benchers usually speak for about 10 minutes, but as this is such an important debate and we do not have time pressure, I suggest 15 minutes for both sides.

1.34 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): First, I welcome my opposite number, the Minister, to his place. He has big shoes to fill but I know he will do it effectively and efficiently.

I thank my right hon. Friend—my good friend; my dear friend—the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for bringing this debate to the House today. He is a fine, fearless and forthright advocate for Yemen. For as long as I have known him, he has provided that advocacy, but never more so than in these past four years when it has been more necessary than ever before. He opened our debate by talking about the unification of Yemen in 1990, when it was a country that was being destroyed and fragmented, to use his words, after four years of appalling conflict, echoes of which we have heard from many hon. and right hon. Members. We know that 100 children die every single day and 70,000 have been killed or have died since the war started. This is the largest humanitarian disaster since the second world war and a shocking testament to our inability to stop this needless slaughter of innocents. A child dies every 12 minutes, he told us, and many have echoed that.

My right hon. Friend referred to the Houthis’ indiscriminate use of landmines, which we have condemned over and over again. He mentioned the Stockholm agreement that was agreed in December 2018, but the implementation process of which has been sadly and woefully slow. On 10 May—at last—the Houthis began their redeployment. We hope, like him, that that is a path to peace. As we know, 80% of goods come in via Hodeidah, and they are much needed—more needed than ever before. There has been $2.6 billion pledged in aid, but only $770 million in aid has been received. Sir Mark Lowcock says that much more must be done to try to ensure that those pledges turn into reality. The most important message that he gave us was, “Stop the bombing now”—something echoed by every hon. and right hon. Member who spoke.

We then heard from somebody who has really shown his mettle over the past few years and has acted where many others just speak—the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). He is somebody we should always listen to, I agreed with everything he said, bar one thing that I will come to in a moment. He posed four pertinent questions to the Minister, and I know the Minister will do his best to answer them. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield has visited Sana’a, Sa’dah and many other towns and cities in Yemen, and has shown his knowledge and understanding from those visits. He said something very important—that the United Kingdom has been complicit in this war. He mentioned the corrupt Houthis leading blockage food aid, and the aerial attacks by the Royal Saudi Air Force and the United Arab Emirates, which I will say a little more about later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chairman of the International Development Committee, has also taken up the cause of Yemen and spoken again and again, with passion and with feeling, to try to make sure that we play our part in this country to stop the slaughter. He said that the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe has been widely described. He emphasised the 80% gap between the funds pledged and the funds actually paid, and asked what the United Kingdom is going to do to ensure that the push for the pledges to come forward is made. Like every other Member, he mentioned the effect on children, especially those under five, and the 1,000 children a day—a day who are denied food and water. He welcomed, of course, the diplomatic leadership by the United Kingdom. Importantly, he agreed that there should be a major rethink on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. He said that although we do have rigorous arms sales licensing, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned, our sales of arms to Saudi Arabia undermine that rigorous set of rules. He said that a nationwide ceasefire is of course vital, but, more than that, we must have a long-term commitment by this country to rebuild Yemen. We would all agree with that, I hope.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said that it is a cause for celebration that the truce outlines are there, and that the peace process is akin to a mediation, but much more needs to be done to build peace. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned peace building, a role close to my heart as our shadow Minister for peace.

We then heard from the former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), a close friend. I served under him on the Committee when he was Chair. His knowledge, understanding, interest and passion came through very strongly. He is a Member we should always listen to,
especially on this subject—especially with his lifelong knowledge and expertise of the middle east and of the conflicts. Not only does he talk about these things, but, as he made clear to all of us this afternoon, he acts, too; he visits the regions—he is fearless in doing that.

The hon. Gentleman made some important points. The UAE is also a big player in the coalition against the Houthis, and of course Iran's role in this proxy war is extremely important and we need to tackle the Iranians on it. He also said something I would certainly agree with: while we listen to what the Americans say about Iran we need to play a much stronger role because we have a warmer relationship with the Iranians. In that regard, I hope I will be having some contact myself with the Iranian ambassador, as I am sure the Minister does regularly. The final point the hon. Gentleman made was that there are more than just two Yemens; this is a multifaceted country and we have to make sure all parties, all tribal groups and all the groups playing a role in this terrible conflict are brought into the peace talks, not just the main contenders.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) again talked about the plight of children. I know that she is concerned and always passionate about trying to stop conflict. She mentioned the increase in violence in other parts of Yemen now that there is a relative ceasefire in Hodeidah.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who also clearly has a great deal of knowledge about the region. He said, again backing up comments of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, that this is not just about weapon sales, and stopping weapon sales will not solve the issue. He also emphasised once again that this is a proxy war.

The Houthi rebels have started to comply with a UN-led agreement to withdraw their forces from the key port of Hodeidah. Before talking about that, however, I want to mention a “Dispatches” documentary by journalist Sue Turton shown on Channel 4 recently. It underlined the role our country is playing and that many personnel, both military and non-military civilian staff, are playing in ensuring the Royal Saudi Air Force is able to operate. They do not touch the bombs—that would be against the law—but they do make sure the aircraft are airworthy and able to go on bombing missions. That is why Labour pledges absolutely to push as hard as we can on this, and if in government to stop all arms sales to Saudi Arabia while we ensure there is a UN investigation into the role those arms sales have played. I accept that, as some Members have said this afternoon, it will not stop the war necessarily, but I urge everybody who has not seen that documentary to watch it; that journalist’s credentials are excellent and her sources impeccable, so it is worth watching because it might change Members’ views about this.

While UN figures estimate over 10,000 people have been killed in the last two years, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project claims that the figure is closer to 60,223, many of these being children as we have heard so often today. Save the Children claims 85,000 may have died from starvation since 2016. I know that figure of 85,000 has been mentioned a few times this afternoon, but we need to remember it. These are children; not only are they the innocent victims of war, but they have no say in trying to stop this war. They were never consulted, and nor were most of the civilian population for that matter.

While we on this side of the House welcome—as I am sure we all do—the progress finally being made under the auspices of the Stockholm accord and the Houthi decision to withdraw from the port of Hodeidah, it is now vital that all sides adhere to the terms of the peace plan. Over 80% of humanitarian aid enters Yemen through the port of Hodeidah. The Yemeni people have suffered enough, and the chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee, Lieutenant General Michael Lollesgaard, is right to say that the unilateral withdrawal of the Houthi rebels must be followed by “the committed, transparent and sustained actions of the parties to fully deliver on their obligations”.

We believe that there must be a full investigation into why there are reports, such as in the documentary I have just mentioned, of British weapons and even SAS soldiers being used in Yemen—it may not be true, but there have been reports. The fact that British weapons may have been used to kill innocent civilians, including many children, is extremely sickening, but we want to make peace in Yemen possible.

Mr Seely: I do not say the hon. Gentleman is wrong to argue the point he is making, but does he understand that insurgency theory specifically suggests that insurgents put their kit and their people where, if attacked from the air, there will be civilian casualties? This has been practised as long as insurgency wars have been going on. So the insurgents are deliberately trying to induce the Saudis to bomb them where civilian casualties will be an outcome. Therefore this is not a black-and-white scenario, but is a very complex one about risk versus reward on targets. I am not saying the Saudis are not getting it wrong sometimes, but it is not a black-and-white situation as they are trying to target a justifiable target that specifically goes into civilian areas.

Fabian Hamilton: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I hope I have not suggested for one minute that there is a simple solution to this conflict and it is simply a matter of stopping UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the whole thing stops, although I would recommend that, if the hon. Gentleman has not seen it, he watches that “Dispatches” documentary because there is a certain a hint in it—although I do not necessarily agree with it. Of course this is a complex situation, but, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield hinted, there may come a time when we all call for the withdrawal of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia as a way of trying to stop the conflict escalating further or of trying to bring about a peace deal. But Labour thinks those arms sales should stop immediately.

We think that in order to make peace in Yemen possible we must end those arms exports to Saudi Arabia immediately. Following in the footsteps of our European allies—Germany, Spain, Italy and Denmark—we think that that will give the Stockholm agreement and the United Nations the best chances of achieving peace, although I do accept that there are the complexities that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight legitimately raised in his intervention. We on this side of the House have consistently called for that immediate cessation of arms sales and of the conflict—of course we all want to
We have also called for an independent UN-led investigation into allegations of war crimes in this terrible conflict. An open letter to the Government sent a few weeks ago by colleagues of mine in the shadow Cabinet and other Opposition parties states that “it is morally reprehensible that the UK government is not only not considering changing its policy” on arms sales “but is actively lobbying other foreign governments, as it did with Germany, to resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia.”

I also want to briefly refer to the House of Lords International Relations Committee recent report that stated that the UK was “narrowly on the wrong side” of the law by allowing arms exports to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen. The report noted that it was concerned that the Saudi-led coalition’s misuse of weaponry bought from the UK has been deliberately or accidentally causing civilian casualties. The report stated: “Relying on assurances by Saudi Arabia and Saudi-led review processes is not an adequate way of implementing the obligations for a risk-based assessment set out in the Arms Trade Treaty.”

My colleague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, claimed in The Guardian earlier this year that as many as 40% of the soldiers in the Saudi coalition and the Houthi rebel army were children, and the United Nations has documented 1,702 cases of child recruitment for which it has clear evidence. As we have heard, Saudi forces have bombed vital infrastructure and innocent civilians, and starvation has been used as a weapon of war through the blockade of ports. A UN human rights investigation in August 2018 noted that Saudi coalition airstrikes might constitute war crimes. I have posed a number of questions to add to the list that the Minister already has, and I will end my remarks here to allow him the chance to answer the questions that have been put to him this afternoon.

1.50 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison):
The unfolding crisis in Yemen reminds us, as we struggle with our own domestic issues, that they are as nothing compared with the disaster that is unfolding in that country. It gives us a sense of perspective. Set against that, of course we can never do enough. I have been in this job for two weeks, and I am already enfolded by a sense of frustration and inadequacy. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who speaks for the Scottish National party, hopes that the UK has been right at the heart of trying to resolve this desperate situation—with the assistance of others, of course.

As the right hon. Member for Leicester East and others mentioned, we do not currently have a diplomatic presence in Yemen, but let me assure them that we monitor the situation on the ground closely, and this assessment is reviewed on an ongoing basis. As soon as it is safe to do so, we will ensure that we have proper diplomatic and, importantly, consular representation on the ground. I know that a number of right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about constituents who are wrapped up in this situation, and not being helped by the fact that the normal assistance that we would give to UK citizens is being hampered because we simply cannot have normal diplomatic or consular relations at this time.

With regard to the right hon. Member for Leicester East’s question about the upcoming state visit, I should like to remind Members of the remarks that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made only yesterday at the Yemen Day meeting of the all-party parliamentary
group on Yemen, where he said that he would raise Yemen with President Trump and that he had already discussed it with Secretary Pompeo. It would be remarkable if that were not the case. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his suggestion of a UK-hosted conference for peace in London. As I have said, we are just one country among many, but we are influential and we have taken a lead on Yemen. In the spirit of the soft power that he cited, I will certainly consider his suggestion very carefully indeed.

I should like to make a few remarks about the UK’s response to the humanitarian crisis. We are providing a further £200 million this financial year, bringing our total humanitarian contribution since the start of the conflict to £770 million. I have checked with officials this morning, because I know that several Members are concerned about the roll-out of that money, and I am told that more than £600 million of that sum has already been paid. I will go further and say that in my early conversations with my interlocutors over the past two weeks, I have made it clear that those who have pledged aid must give that aid. Indeed, I have underscored the fact that it is not good enough simply to pledge money, and that they must hand it over.

This is slightly complicated because most of those interlocutors, including the UK, disburse most of those funds through non-governmental organisations. That is quite right and proper, and it is the best way to achieve our aims, but the process means that there could be some delay in disbursing funds. According to the programmes and schedules of the NGOs, donors must hand over the cash as soon as they possibly can, and that has been the burden of my conversations with my interlocutors over the past few days. I hope that that gives right hon. and hon. Members the reassurance that they were rightly seeking from me.

Our latest disbursement of funds will help to meet some of the immediate food needs of the people in Yemen. It will enable us to feed people, to treat them and to ensure that they get better access to water and basic sanitation, which leads me to the subject of cholera and watery diarrhoea.

Almost 300,000 suspected cases have been recorded by the World Health Organisation. Our support is saving lives, and the British public need to know that, but it goes beyond simply giving people vaccines—simple though that is in the case of cholera. It has to mean a much wider public health approach to tackling what we in this country would call an “antique disease”—a disease that should not be affecting people in the 21st century—and that means instructing people in proper hygiene. We need teams who can do that, and I have underscored the fact that it is not good enough simply to pledge money, and that they must hand it over.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about cholera. It is a truly terrible medieval disease, and the outbreak is the largest in the world. Does he understand that the cause of the outbreak is the smashing up of the infrastructure through the nightly bombings by the Saudi and Emirati air force? If infrastructure is smashed up like that, and if sewage is mixed with clean water, cholera emerges. Will he bear that in mind as he makes progress in the Foreign Office on this difficult issue?

Dr Morrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I will come on to address some of his remarks in my contribution, but he is quite right that poor, broken infrastructure inevitably means cholera, particularly in a country like Yemen.

There is some good news in that the instances of cholera in Yemen have fallen for the fourth week running. That is positive and shows the difference that British and international support is making, and although it is early days, I very much hope that that positive trend continues.

Several right hon. and hon. Members spoke about what we do next—what happens in the event that the conflict is resolved to the point that we can start rebuilding Yemen. I think we have actually started that. We have to look at Yemen’s economy and see what we can do to support it—even in its current desperate state and even at a time when the priority clearly has to be to stop people fighting and to resolve issues relating to the humanitarian crisis. We need to ensure that what passes for a Government in Yemen is able to disburse funds to public servants, and we have been working on that. By that, I mean disbursing funds to public servants right across the country, not just those in the parts that are controlled by the Government of Yemen. We have made it clear that the Government must pay public sector workers, some of whom have not been paid for two years.

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) made a balanced speech. He forensically dissected the conflict in Yemen, rightly pointing out that it is not just one war, but several conflicts. The principal one that we are engaged with today is clearly the conflict between the Government of Yemen and the Houthi insurgency, but there is also the war in the south between the Government of Yemen and the so-called Southern Movement. Most worryingly for those who live some distance from the middle east, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continues to be active. We may not hear a great deal about that in the context of Yemen right now, but it remains there, and we must be alive to the threat that it poses, both to Yemen and to the rest of the world.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the World Food Programme. The protection of NGOs in general is a matter of the utmost importance, and they must be allowed to do what they do safely. The World Food Programme is absolutely essential to resolving the situation in Yemen right now, and its work—for example, to ensure the safety of grain in the Red Sea Mills—is vital to unlock those stores and to ensure that people have food. I salute the World Food Programme and all the NGOs that put themselves at considerable risk. Looking around the world today, there is a real risk that those people’s lives are often in peril, but they continue never the less.

As for the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about southern voices in Yemen, I am absolutely clear that any process needs to include all the people of Yemen, including those vital southern voices. Indeed, the UN special envoy Martin Griffiths reaffirmed that in his most recent briefing to the Security Council on 15 May. It is right that the UK continues to engage, so far as it
possibly can, with a wide range and diverse group of Yemeni individuals, and we will continue to do that wherever we can.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made several vital points in his important contribution. The evidence stands in relation to child soldiers. We are appalled by the presence of child soldiers, some of whom we are told are as young as eight years old on the Houthi side of this conflict. The evidence is clearer for the Houthis, but the accusation stands that both sides are employing minors in this conflict. That must stop. It is a truly terrible thing, and it must stop.

I entirely agree with the need to involve women in that process, and Martin Griffiths made that clear in his remarks. It is always important to point out that conflict leads to an increase in gender-based violence, and that is certainly happening in this case. I am pleased that we continue to support the UN, particularly the Yemeni women's pact for peace and security, which is extremely important. As far as we can, we will ensure that all groups within Yemen are involved in this process.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that our commitment to Yemen must be long standing. As he will know as Chair of the International Development Committee, the important thing is that we do not consider the job done when one way or another this conflict inevitably grinds to a halt—although may that be sooner rather than later—because we need a plan for the future. We have also heard about the dusting off of old plans where they may be of assistance. He is also right to call for a ceasefire, which we of course want. Goodness me, wouldn't that be good? We must plan for what might come in the future while doing everything we can with all our interlocutors to impress the importance of dialling down and stopping the conflict, and I will come on to why that is important not just for Yemen, but for the wider region.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) rightly concentrated on the impact that the conflict is having on the most vulnerable: the children. I am pleased that UK aid means that the screening and treating of 30,000 children for malnutrition is going ahead this year. That will always be inadequate, but these are big numbers, and it means so much at a human level for people who would otherwise be left to face their fate. Of course, that action comes from the £770 million previously cited, which puts the UK in the premier division—head and shoulders above all the other countries with which we can reasonably be compared.

People in this country are sometimes said to be parsimonious when it comes to international development. I do not believe that to be the case, but they want to know that their money is being spent properly. I do not think there will be many objections to spending money in Yemen today. Incidentally, I agree with my hon. Friend's insistence that the UK must be a champion of the international rules-based system. It is something that goes without saying, but she is right to make that important point.

I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has probably left, but I will nevertheless deal with his points because he is an acknowledged expert in this area. He is obviously concerned about Saudi Arabia's purchasing of arms from the UK, and we have been around this busy many times. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who speaks for the Opposition, knows pretty much what I am going to say. The Labour party, with all respect, is an expert in this matter, because it was famously involved in some of this when in office. However, this is not something that can be attributed to any particular political party. We do comply with the EU consolidated criteria and with the tenets of the Export Control Act 2002, which is so important. I am absolutely clear that this country must ethically pursue whatever we do. I am prepared to argue, though this is probably neither the time nor the place— you may call me out of order, Mr Deputy Speaker—that if the United Kingdom did not sell arms in the way it does, for legitimate self-defence in accordance with international law, other countries would do so, and probably a lot less ethically.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield is concerned about the investigation of things that have gone wrong in the prosecution of Saudi Arabia's operations in Yemen, and there have been some horrible examples. The UK is heavily involved in ensuring that when that happens, as it regrettably does in conflict, it is properly investigated. It is not right to dismiss the Joint Incidents Assessment Team, which has produced over 100 reports on incidents during this conflict. We will clearly hold the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's feet to the fire in relation to the investigation of these matters, as we will with all our partners in the region. I hope that gives some reassurance.

I am being hurried along, and it is absolutely right that the Whip on duty should do that, but, needless to say, the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) were superb. I agree with much of what they have to say. The latter, of course, has an extensive geopolitical understanding of the region, for which he is famed, but both speeches were balanced and highly commendable.

The Government are fully committed to ending the devastating conflict in Yemen. We believe that supporting the work of Martin Griffiths and the UN-led process is the best way to do that, for which I heard general assent in the Chamber today. It is in the interests of all parties, but especially of the Yemeni people themselves, that we work together to find a lasting solution to this appalling situation. For our part, the UK will do everything we can, both through our determined diplomatic efforts and through our generous humanitarian support, to help find the solutions about which the right hon. Member for Leicester East spoke so passionately.

2.12 pm

Keith Vaz: This has been an excellent and passionate debate, fully justifying the decision of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), to give us time, for which we thank him.

I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), and my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). And I thank the Minister, who will always remember his first speech from the Dispatch Box as a Foreign Office Minister. He has responded very positively.
It is often said that the war in Yemen is a forgotten war, but it is not forgotten in this House. Today we have remembered Yemen, but another 12 Yemeni children have died since the start of this debate. What we want is not great speeches but great actions. A ceasefire is not a mantra but an objective. We need this ceasefire, and this country needs to make sure it happens. We need to seize the moment and bring peace to this sad, troubled but beautiful land.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House notes that 22 May 2019 is the 28th anniversary of the unification of Yemen, when that country emerged from a long and painful civil war; further notes that today Yemen is once again in a deep and pitiful state of conflict, having entered the fifth year of its current, tragic war; acknowledges that the most recent estimate places the death toll in excess of 70,000, of which 10,000 have died in the last five months alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; commends the work of the UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, who brought opposing sides together for agreements including on a ceasefire in the Al-Hodeidah Governate; regrets that the implementation of those agreements has been slow or non-existent; and calls on the Government to take every possible measure to support an immediate ceasefire, the flow of humanitarian aid and further peace talks in Yemen.

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**Whitsun Adjournment**

2.13 pm

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It is always a privilege to lead such debates as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, not least at the moment, as I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about something other than our withdrawal from the European Union. I promise not to utter the B-word in the Chamber this afternoon. Instead, I will use the next few minutes to remind you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and colleagues on both sides of the House why I represent the best constituency in the United Kingdom, with a few policy complaints thrown in.

I can say with absolute certainty that austerity is not over in Gateshead. Despite the Government’s proclamations to the contrary in recent months, and despite their promise to shake the magic money tree for the north-east of England, we have seen more damaging cuts coupled with welfare reforms and chronic, continually rising unemployment in my constituency. I say that advisedly. Unemployment in my constituency now stands at 7.2%, and it has risen month on month every month without fail. There are 470 more unemployed individuals that at the same time last year, so unemployment has not gone away in the north-east of England.

We see local authorities being forced to turn away vulnerable people from their doors. In my constituency, the employees of social housing providers are creating their own ad hoc, unofficial food banks to help tenants who simply cannot make ends meet.

I am not sure whether we should be delighted that the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, Professor Philip Alston, chose to visit Newcastle and Gateshead while gathering evidence. Believe me, we would much prefer not to be of interest to an investigation into extreme poverty. None the less, it was finally an opportunity for members of the communities I serve—those communities are bearing the brunt of successive Government policies—local authorities and voluntary organisations to share their experiences with officials from outside the region who care enough to listen.

The report, published yesterday, is a damning indictment of how this Government treat some of their citizens and of how they view their role in office. Sadly, nothing in Professor Philip Alston’s report should come as a surprise to Members. Opposition Members have repeatedly highlighted how this Government are driving constituents into abject poverty while slashing the support services that were once available to help the most vulnerable.

We have just had a great debate about Yemen. It is ironic that Ministers are quite happy to accept UN evidence on Yemen but are openly dismissive of an objective UN report on what is happening here in terms of domestic policy. That is rather strange. This is, and rightly should be, a national embarrassment. How many more of our constituents will be starved and frozen out of their homes before this Government decide to change course?

I believe that the existing council tax system contributes to the difficulties of local authorities like mine in Gateshead when it comes to raising enough money to meet increasing demand. The system is flawed and requires urgent reform to establish some equality across the UK.
The vast majority of properties in my Gateshead constituency—over 70%—are in council tax bands A and B, unlike in some parts of the south-east, where the average banding is C, D or, in some cases, E. Having a high proportion of band A and B properties significantly reduces how much money can be raised through the council tax system. As a direct result, Gateshead Council has no alternative but to continually raise council tax by the highest percentage allowed. That, in turn, has resulted in Gateshead having one of the country’s most expensive council tax bills for band A properties.

In Gateshead, it costs nearly four times more in council tax to live in a one-bedroom band A flat than it costs to live in a band D property here in Westminster, which is clearly unfair. The system is punitive, outdated and regressive, and it should be replaced at the earliest opportunity. Withdrawing the revenue support grant without reforming and amending the council tax side of the local government funding system is causing hardship and suffering to our constituents, and it must be considered almost criminal because of the way in which it impacts on individuals.

We have now had council tax for almost 30 years—let us remember that it was meant to be a temporary stopgap measure getting rid of the poll tax, or the community charge, as it was known—and it does not work. The band D national median is meaningless in a place like Gateshead. Unilaterally taking away the revenue support grant without altering the other side of the system was a harsh decision that has clearly affected some areas much more than others.

I promised some positivity, and I realise that my speech so far has set out a pretty bleak picture, so let me say that despite revenue support grant cuts of more than £100 million per year, my local authority continues to promote Gateshead as a great place to live, work and invest. Gateshead Council has already attracted hundreds of millions of pounds in investment in recent years. It has ambitious plans for further investment of £1.5 billion in the next 10 to 15 years, starting with ambitious plans for Gateshead quays and the Baltic quarter to develop in the next 10 to 15 years, starting with ambitious plans for Gateshead quays and the Baltic quarter to develop

Although Members of my political persuasion believe that investment for regeneration should come directly from Government, because that works, I also recognise that there is more chance of me watching Newcastle United win the premier league next year than this Government changing course on public investment in the regeneration of areas in the north-east of England, which, sadly, continue to be left behind, as the unemployment statistics show graphically. If any Member has a spare million or two burning a hole in their pockets, I would be delighted to welcome them to Gateshead for a look around, to meet the people and see the massive potential that exists—they will be given a very warm welcome and be under no illusion that it is a great place to work, invest and live.

As I touched upon earlier, council tax takes up an ever-increasing proportion of people’s income. We have all seen the reports of local authorities pursuing residents through the courts with bailiffs to recover insignificant sums of outstanding tax, adding significant charges and fees—and misery—in the process. I am therefore delighted to talk about the excellent work that my local authority is doing to identify and support some of our most vulnerable residents. The Thrive initiative uses council tax arrears as one of the trigger points for increased support. If residents fall into arrears with council tax, it is often a tell-tale sign that there may be other significant issues on which they need support. As a result, instead of multiplying debt through the recovery process and causing no end of distress to constituents, the Thrive team in Gateshead contacts residents who fall into arrears to offer them additional support.

We know all too well that very often those in our communities who are most in need are the least likely to seek help or even to know where to go to for help. The Thrive initiative does that work for them; it reaches out and tries to engage proactively with residents who may be having difficulties, with the aim of preventing the situation from deteriorating. Not only is this holistically an excellent initiative—giving assistance before people reach the point of crisis—but it is actually beneficial to the people themselves and financially beneficial to the council. So I congratulate Gateshead Council on developing such schemes in the most difficult economic circumstances.

I feel that I have spoken for long enough but, although this does not directly affect my constituency, it would be remiss of me not to mention the ongoing abandonment of British Steel. We wish every success to all initiatives to try to retain steel production in this country, as this is so vital. While I was growing up, I watched deindustrialisation along the Tyne, with the loss of shipbuilding and heavy engineering, and the closure of coal mines, so we need to do something to retain a strategically vital industry here in Britain. Time and time again, we have seen Governments allow the deindustrialisation of the north of England, which has devastating long-term effects on communities, some of which will never recover. It is about time that industries
that are vital to not only our economy nationally, but our local economies, workers and their families across the UK, were afforded the same protections as those in the square mile in the City of London. We managed to find £500 billion to bail out the City after the financial crash, so we must be able to find a few hundred million pounds to save vital industries for the future strategic interest of our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Members on both sides of the House and all staff a very restful Whitsun—we all deserve it.

2.26 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Whitsun recess, I wish to make a number of points. I am so glad that we are having this debate, because the previous one was cancelled. Unless I get a stare from the Chair, I am probably going to take a little longer than I normally would, but I assure the House that I will not squeeze colleagues out—I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, would intervene.

The first thing I want to say is about this place. I am very worried about Parliament—indeed, I am frightened about it. I realise that everyone else knows better than I do, but since I have been here I have never seen this place in such disarray. As we work here, we have our own view, but this is playing very badly with the general public out there—every minute, every hour, every week and every month, damage is being done to our democracy. I have never seen incompetence at the level that we are experiencing at the moment, with Ministers coming and going—it is a complete fiasco. We all know that the terrible 2017 general election messed everything up, but we have had tight results before and we have legislated—we have been here, done our work and got on with our job. That is not happening at the moment.

I say to colleagues, perhaps those on my side, that very few human beings have what it takes to be a leader of a party and indeed a Prime Minister. That does not mean to say that someone is a wonderful person because they end up as Prime Minister; I am just saying that very few human beings have what it takes to be a leader. They think, “Oh, forget the constituency, it is a just a vehicle to get here. I want to lead my party.” In fact, I even wanted that before I was elected.” That is how ridiculous the situation is at the moment, and it plays out there very badly indeed.

We have the poorest set of world leaders I have seen in my lifetime. I struggle to point to someone who I think is at the top of their game. Let me say something to the House, although it will not take a blind bit of notice of me—after all, who am I? I am of no importance; I am a has-been. I want to say this: this is a really serious crisis and I hope that on Sunday, when we get the results of today’s vote, we will get a grip on this place, because we need to reassure the general public that the democracy that was hard fought for means that it is worth going out to vote. That ends that Victor Meldrew rant.

Ambassadors continually visit Southend, and why would they not? We have had ambassadors from Taiwan, the Philippines and Qatar, and we are shortly to have visits from the Indian Economics Minister and the German ambassador. They all arrive in Southend and just cannot understand why we are not a city.

On 5 March, I hosted a meeting with our excellent Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), and the headteachers of secondary schools in Southend to discuss the thorny issue of school funding. The meeting was constructive and I believe it helped both sides to understand the difficulties. We will have a similar meeting with primary school headteachers in July.

For those who were there—I was delighted to be present with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the Secretary of State for Defence and other colleagues—the wonderful Music Man project really put life into perspective. When I first became an MP, I had never seen anyone in a straitjacket before. It was fantastic to see the pride on the faces of the families as they saw these people with learning difficulties perform so wonderfully well at the Albert Hall. The musical was called “Music is Magic in Space”, and the performance followed the one at the Palladium. The founder of the project, David Stanley, has been awarded the Winston Churchill fellowship, which will allow him to travel to America in November to study similar projects. That is why the show will be taken to Broadway. That is definitely going to happen next year. I am sure that Essex colleagues—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) on the Front Bench—will have constituents who took part in the project.

I recently had a meeting with our former colleague Helen Clark, who was the Member for Peterborough, and she had some wonderful ideas on children’s mental health. She met me with a lady called Monika Jephcott and a chap called Jeff Thomas, who were from Play Therapy UK, and we discussed proposals for a new approach to child mental health, including work to put the interests of children at the centre of the mental health Bill that we have been promised.

There may be a divide in the House on the governance of independent schools, but the past nine years have seen a huge shift in education, and specifically an increase in independent schools. As far as I am concerned, it is imperative that the leaders of independent schools are held to account, especially by the Independent Schools Association, because it is at school that children learn human values and life lessons. Independent schools cannot be allowed to get away with substandard conduct.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of meeting Southend resident and fibromyalgia campaigner Billy Mansell. More than 2.7 million people in the UK live with fibromyalgia, yet the condition is little understood. Billy is leading the way and I fully support his efforts to raise awareness and the understanding of this chronic condition and to ensure that patients throughout Essex get the right support.

Some people think I am obsessed with animals, but I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have even more animals than me. The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and its wonderful co-founder Lorraine Platt and a chap called Jeff Thomas, who were from Play Therapy UK, and we discussed proposals for a new approach to child mental health, including work to put the interests of children at the centre of the mental health Bill that we have been promised.

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there is still a long way to go on live exports, trophy hunting and the fur trade. I look forward to working with Lorraine and her colleagues on many more successes. We had a wonderful gathering in the Attlee suite, with all these wonderful dogs and many colleagues. It is good to see that the House has reacted well to issues of animal welfare.

On the same subject, more than half of all pets in the UK are exotic species. Unfortunately, 90% of exotic fish and 75% of exotic reptiles do not survive their first 12 months in captivity as domestic pets. There are numerous reasons for those sorry figures, but the pet labelling scheme is a series of proposals that seeks to address the problem. The hope is that by providing a labelling scheme to promote informed decisions at the point of sale and evidence-based guidance on husbandry and inspection, the number of pets dying will be reduced.

The House of Commons is sometimes parodied as a place where one can get alcohol in abundance. I recently chaired a meeting of the all-party group on liver health at which we were given some shocking figures. We were delighted to learn that the steps that have been taken relating to hepatitis C and alcohol are now being looked at seriously, but I wonder how many colleagues realise that the most common cause of liver disease in England is a person having had too much drink. One person dies every two hours because of alcoholic liver disease—it kills more people than diabetes and road deaths combined. This under-reported problem costs the national health service £3.5 billion a year. There are so many ways to address the problem. The issue of alcohol labelling needs to be looked at again, as does pricing and NHS support. The good news for colleagues is that in a few months we will host a parliamentary drop-in event, which colleagues will be able to attend and, without any embarrassment, get their livers tested.

For 20 years I have been dealing with a constituent called Mr Nicholas Markos—that is a true story; he comes regularly to my surgeries. He lives with his mother, Milica. The issue was that his neighbour shifted the fence three and a half inches over their property line. That resulted in a horrendous legal situation. I am sure the House will be shocked to learn that the person who moved the fence got away with it all while Mr Markos lost everything, including his house—his mother is now in a home and he now lives in a car—because of the legal fees and bad advice. I am not going to stop Mr Markos coming to my surgery, but it costs the taxpayer a huge amount of money when I write to Ministers and get the same old thing passed backwards and forwards from the legal profession. Of course, Mr Markos cannot even get legal aid because it is so complicated. I am very determined and am not going to give up until we get justice for Mr Markos and his mother.

I continue to support Edwin and Janet Woodger as they try to resolve a dispute with the Co-op. My constituents have been reasonable throughout the process and I hope that the matter can be brought to a resolution at the earliest opportunity. The financial ombudsman is currently trying to help.

Many of my constituents are unhappy with the roll-out to the private sector of IR35 rules on off-payroll working. I know that the Minister who was dealing with it, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), is apparently now the Leader of the House, but I hope that he will brief whoever has taken on his previous job. It is a significant development, and although I am glad that the Government appear to have been interested in the views of stakeholders thus far, I urge the Treasury to continue to work with small businesses to ensure that any unnecessary damage to individuals’ livelihoods in the transition is avoided.

Sir Jack Petchey—I see the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) nodding away; he represents a part of London near my old home town—is in his early nineties and is an absolute legend. Rather than sit on all his largesse, he has given his money to an organisation called Speak Out. I think that some constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point are involved in this wonderful organisation. I pay tribute to Sir Jack Petchey.

Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 is a significant piece of legislation. I recognise the need to support tenants, but I also acknowledge the impact that the proposed changes will have on landlords. I take this opportunity to call on the Government to ensure that landlords and tenants alike continue to be consulted on the changes. I realise that it is a difficult issue.

I voted against the way we have proceeded on the restoration and renewal of this building—we lost by 17 votes. No one told us that the work would start immediately, meaning that every time we turn up here there is more scaffolding going up and more wires to trip over, and we cannot go down into the Crypt or up to the top of Big Ben. I should tell colleagues, though, that along with another colleague I went to the top of Big Ben three weeks ago and the restoration of the clock face is absolutely fantastic. After the Notre Dame disaster, we obviously have to address things in this place. My colleague on the all-party group on fire safety, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will agree that fire safety is imperative. It was mentioned in business questions this morning. It is imperative that as many colleagues as possible click on the link and go through the fire safety procedures. It does not take long. When I mentioned it last time, several colleagues complained that it was not working properly, but it has been fixed now.

Fresh information has recently come to light on the so-called Prittlewell Prince, a discovery of major significance to the history of the United Kingdom. The body is thought to belong to a prince or aristocrat, and archaeologists are calling it the UK’s answer to Tutankhamun. And where do you think it is, Mr Deputy Speaker? It’s in Southend. It is yet another reason Southend should be declared a city.

Anna Baldan, a constituent of mine, lost her husband, Alessandro, after he fell from his mobility scooter and sustained fatal head injuries. Now Mrs Baldan wants laws to be re-examined regarding mobility scooter safety. Specifically, she would like it to become a legal requirement for all mobility scooter users to wear a safety helmet. Perhaps the Department for Transport could look at that.

Dr Zaidi is an outstanding local GP. The Kent Elms health centre is an established primary care site that has just gone through a major redevelopment. They have kindly asked me to open the centre. The development supports the principles of the NHS 10-year forward vision in providing more accessible high-quality services, and it is hoped that these newly refurbished premises
[Sir David Amess]

will encourage newly qualified medical professionals to remain in Southend. I pay tribute to Dr Zaidi and his wonderful wife, who is also a GP.

I cannot for the life of me understand the way the local authority—whatever political party has been running the council over the past years—has overseen the Kent Elms improvement road safety network. I cannot see any improvement, and now they have put back that huge monstrosity over the road, even though there are now traffic lights. It is incredible.

Angela Halifax is a lady who provides assisted living. Such places play a fundamental role in local communities, but she is concerned that the recent increase in service VAT will prove detrimental to those individuals who are most vulnerable. Angela would like Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Treasury to re-examine their decision to bring forward this change.

My constituent Colin Baldwin has pledged to cycle 1,000 miles to raise £10,000 towards the rebuilding of St Stephen’s church. The £1,000 by 1,000 initiative—1,000 people raising £1,000 each over two years—hopes to raise enough money to rebuild the church.

I turn now to Network Rail and c2c. A number of Essex residents are fed up with the situation at the moment, with the maintenance works going on morning, noon and night. I do not understand it at all, and suddenly we are told that the trains are not running from Fenchurch Street and one has to scoot down to Liverpool Street. It is going on and on. These people do not seem to be accountable to anyone. The latest fiasco is that the old system for buying tickets whereby passengers put their credit card in has been changed and the queues with the new system are endless. It is ridiculous.

Alan Hart, a local constituent who has now become a Leigh town councillor, has been corresponding with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other stakeholders about water companies and other organisations that he believes should re-examine the use of rateable value to determine water bills.

In February, the Kings money advice centre in my constituency, led by the wonderful Rev. Gavin Dixon, celebrated its 10th anniversary. I pay tribute to the wonderful support it gives to people in enormous financial difficulties. The Salvation Army centre recently reopened its day centre in the area I represent. It does a fantastic job on behalf of the community. As I am always telling its day centre in the area I represent. It does a fantastic job on behalf of the community.

I am sure that all colleagues will agree that we owe a huge debt of gratitude to our veterans. Unfortunately, my constituent Darren Turner has not been receiving the support he deserves from the Department for Work and Pensions. I expect the Government to support former servicemen and women in any way they can, and I would ask the relevant Minister to re-examine the specific case.

I come now to what is a terrible tragedy. A constituent of mine, Mrs Rayner, came to my last surgery. In March 2018, the body of her grandson, who I had met—wonderful chap—was pulled from a river after he had been missing for three months. She and the mother of this poor boy are in meltdown. In August of the same year, the autopsy was completed and as it stands there is still an open verdict, which is obviously very distressing to the family. I believe the case needs to be looked at.

What is awful is that Mrs Rayner has been told by the DWP that she is not suffering from bereavement and as a result her personal independence payment has been reduced. This is absolutely ludicrous. It was clear to me that my constituent was suffering and I know that her GP agrees. The DWP needs to look at this case urgently. Adam’s mother, Clare, is hopeful that all future missing persons cases will be treated equally and that the parents of missing individuals will be listened to. I very much support the family.

Many colleagues say, “David, we’ve been to Southend airport. Isn’t it fantastic?” It is, but the residents whose houses adjoin it did not expect these huge jets now to be literally at the back of their fences pouring out noxious fumes. Recently on “The One Show” residents of Wells Avenue complained about having these jets with all their fumes in their back gardens. The Dialogue with the airport authority goes on and on. It has reached a point where they might as well have a compulsory purchase order, buy the whole road of houses, give them a decent return and settle the matter. The airport is suggesting the installation of a noise barrier and other such things, but I do not think that any of us, over what I am sure will be a beautiful summer, would want to sit out in our garden with a jet at the back ready to take off.

Now is the Time for Change is a company set up by an inspirational constituent called Kelly Swain. As she continues her personal journey, she is working with colleagues to ensure that local people, especially children, have access to the wellbeing and mental health services they need. I am going to see her at the weekend. We were all encouraged by a meeting that recently took place with the mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), and we now look forward to meeting the chairman of our local clinical commissioning group. It is about time we had a meeting with José Garcia.

My constituent Robert Hubbard recently attended one of my constituency advice surgeries. His daughter-in-law, Lucianna, lives in Mombasa. When she has spent time in the UK, she has always obeyed the conditions of her visa. She is now looking forward to obtaining a visitor visa to come and see her children, but the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration have not granted the application. I have received assurances that Lucianna would obey all the conditions of her visa, and I call on the Home Office and the Immigration Minister, with whom I am in dialogue, to re-examine the case.

Mojo and The Vine are two shops that have been converted into bars, and they are causing mayhem. When I was canvassing in the area during the last local elections, I turned around and a car pulled up with its lights on, even though it was during the day. An electric window was lowered, two chaps appeared and a plastic container was passed over—nothing is being done about Mojo and The Vine. I want action from the council and the police on this matter.

I was very surprised that in the elections for two of the wards of Leigh-on-Sea Town Council, there were 153 spoiled ballot papers, some of which had “Abolish Leigh Town Council” written across them. In another ward—these are very small areas—there were 50 spoiled
I know that we have a good business, and the country understandably be worried and concerned, as I am. But base and people who work in the supply chain will liquidation. Steelworkers and their families, the contractor working in the supply chain, went into compulsory and across the local area, with probably 20,000 people British Steel, which employs 4,500 people in Scunthorpe last few weeks have been some of the toughest. Yesterday, they have had some tough times and tough years. The been in the vanguard of its growth, prosperity and ages, for their contribution to our nation. They have to his great talent.

Sir David Amess: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. My goodness, I was relieved that Southend United won their last game, so we were not relegated. As a staunch West Ham supporter, I think that having got off to a bad start and lost the first four matches, to finish 10th in the league was a tremendous outcome. My youngest daughter plays for Arsenal ladies, and they are a great team, but I am a dyed-in-the-wool West Ham supporter and I join him in congratulating them on their season. Onwards and upwards, and—who knows?—just like Leicester, they might win the league.

With my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) sitting nearby, I am thinking about the spring clean. I took part in our local spring clean, led by a wonderful local councillor, Meg Davidson, who is now deputy leader of the Conservative group. I think it is a wonderful opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I join all other Members in wishing you, the other Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker and all the staff of the House a wonderful, joyous, restful and Brexit-free Whitsun.

2.50 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): We have been privileged to hear a masterclass from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess)—I will call him the hon. Member for the city of Southend—on how to speak in the end-of-term Adjournment debate. I am a mere apprentice to his great talent.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to steelworkers and their families across the country, and across the ages, for their contribution to our nation. They have been in the vanguard of its growth, prosperity and development. They are amazing men and women, and they have had some tough times and tough years. The last few weeks have been some of the toughest. Yesterday, British Steel, which employs 4,500 people in Scunthorpe and across the local area, with probably 20,000 people working in the supply chain, went into compulsory liquidation. Steelworkers and their families, the contractor base and people who work in the supply chain will understandably be worried and concerned, as I am. But I know that we have a good business, and the country needs this business. Despite the challenge, I am confident about the future.

A few months ago, after a public fundraising campaign, a statue dedicated to steelworkers across the ages was unveiled in Scunthorpe town centre. That iconic statue is a beautiful piece of public art, and people swarmed to the town centre from across the community to recognise it. It demonstrates how the industry cuts through everything that the local area is about.

Steelmaking and steelworkers belong to place. Place is very important in our past, present and future. Many new industries, including digital industries, have been established, and it is good to see that, but they are not as located in place; they can move quickly and freely across boundaries and countries. That creates a huge challenge for us all as policy makers. Place is important, and steelmaking has helped to create the place of Scunthorpe. The discovery in the 1850s of iron ore resulted in iron ore being mined for a long while and eventually led to the building up of the steel industry.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am pleased to hear about the steelworkers’ monument that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned. There is a firefighters’ memorial at St Pauls and a construction workers’ memorial at Tower Hill, but they have been there for only 20 years. It is important that we recognise the contribution of ordinary men and women—that may be in their industry, rather than as individuals—so I am pleased to hear that there is such a memorial in Scunthorpe for steelworkers.

Nic Dakin: And memorials to people who have helped to build this country; and memorials that include women as well as men. Most memorials to women in this country are actually to Queen Victoria, but the memorial in Scunthorpe includes a female steelworker and a male steelworker, recognising that it is through men’s and women’s work across the ages that this country has been built.

Steelmaking is the beating heart of the community that I am proud to represent. It is what gives the community its character and strength. Everyone has friends or family members who work in the steel industry or its supply chains. It provides high-skilled, well-paid jobs that drive the local economy, and has always been passionate about and committed to apprenticeships, training and investment—investing in community causes and the community effort. The supply chain and the contractor base are also hugely important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) said, this is not just an industry that is important to places around the country; it is an industry that is important to our country and it is part of our national asset. The strategic value of the steel industry is massive. It is a foundation industry that underpins our manufacturing and economic performance. If we are serious about being an independent and modern country, we need to have our own independent steelmaking capacity so that we have defence and infrastructure security, otherwise we are vulnerable to the whims and vicissitudes of others.

The strongest economies in the world have strong steel industries. Look at the countries with the strongest steel industries: No. 1—USA; No. 2—China; No. 3—Japan; No. 7—Germany. The UK currently comes in at No. 30. Do we want to drop further down the league table? No, we do not. If we are serious about punching above our weight and being a leader in the world, we
cannot slip further down that league table. If we want to be a proud, modern, independent nation, we need to have our own independent steelworking capacity.

People care about steel, and we can see that in the response to the current crisis. Outside this House, there is a consensus that our steel industry is necessary for our future as a nation. Inside this House, we saw the solidarity expressed from all corners of the Chamber yesterday. I pay tribute to all colleagues in the House for speaking strongly with one voice about how important this industry is, and for saying that we need this industry for our national strength and national benefit. There was a chorus of support across the House for the Business Secretary in his commitment to find a positive outcome through the current set of challenges, and a willingness to explore, from all corners of the House, whatever future ownership models are necessary to secure our industry for the future. One voice, one message—to save our steel because we need it for our nation’s future.

Steel is one of the most productive industries, and its productivity has increased massively over the last 20 years. It is also a hugely sustainable industry. Steel is highly recyclable—one of the most recyclable products. We may be able to do more to ensure that we recycle all our steel and use the best of what we have got, but steel made in the UK reduces the carbon footprint of production, so it is a sustainable product. If we are forced to import our steel from outside the UK, that will affect our ability to reduce our carbon footprint. The upsurge in desire to do better on tackling climate change is another reason why we need our own independent steelmaking capacity. That is incontrovertible and irresistible.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an extremely important point about the steel industry. I am reminded of the closure of Ravenscraig in Lanarkshire in Scotland in 1992. That was a massive steelworks. I was born in 1989, and nearly 30 years on, the vast bulk of that site is still wasteland. A whole generation have grown up with the impact of that. The idea that we can just turn these industries on and off and that the people around them are not affected is totally wrong-headed. That is the economic vandalism that this Government’s laissez-faire approach is doing to communities if they do not intervene to save nationally strategic industries such as steel.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes a good point. My hon. Friend speaks about还需要努力。如果能更好地利用国内的资源，对于工业和就业的未来会有帮助。需要制定更有效的购入和采购政策，以支持国内钢铁行业。

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Hearing my hon. Friend speak, I recall what happened when Brymbo steelworks in my constituency closed in 1990 and part of its infrastructure was shipped to China. That was extremely traumatic for people, and sometimes it is not recognised what happens within a community when a steelworks closes.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Already, during my short contribution to the debate, we see the way in which the steel industry connects with people in a way that some other industries do not. People know that this industry is a throbbing heart of the country. We need it if we are to be a proud, strong country, and closures such as the one she mentions have a detrimental impact on not only communities but the nation.

I called on then Prime Minister David Cameron to convene a steel summit in October 2015, which brought together unions, steelmakers, partners in the industry, key stakeholders and Government. At the summit, we focused on five asks. While applauding the Secretary of State for his urgent action, I am critical of the Government for not progressing those fundamental asks more strongly. There has been some movement, but not as much as we would like. Those asks need to be addressed to get the industry on to a level playing field, so that we can be not 30th in the league but battling for the top spot.

The first of the five asks was energy costs. Energy costs for the UK steel industry are much higher than those in Europe and elsewhere, and we still need to do something about that. There was mitigation through the carbon price floor tax, but it took about three years to come in. There is still a gap, and the energy required to support our steel industry is still far more expensive than elsewhere in Europe. We need to work on that if our steel industry is to move on to a level playing field where it can have a sustainable and strong future in the lifeblood of our nation.

The second ask was about procurement. The Government have taken some steps on procurement. In 2016, they brought in new procurement guidelines. It has been a struggle to make sure that those public procurement guidelines bite and are effective. It is one thing to have something that is nice on a piece of paper, but it needs to have some traction in terms of action. Earlier this year, the Government published their analysis of where we are on that, and their own figures show that only 43% of the £158 million of procurement by the UK Government last year was produced in the UK.

Obviously, there is still work that can be done there. I am thinking of things such as the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and would it not be good if that was all made with UK steel? I am thinking of things such as Heathrow, and I would like to commend Heathrow for the commitment it has made throughout to using UK steel wherever possible in its procurement processes, while of course meeting proper procurement guidelines. Heathrow has
had the best practice in the way it has approached this, as indeed has Network Rail if we look at its performance. HS2 is another public procurement programme that could strengthen the messages it is putting out on procurement.

I was pleased on Monday to sign the steel charter, which is the work of steelmakers and the steel unions, and that the Government have also signed the charter. The charter points out that the UK Government steel procurement pipeline has been analysed as amounting to over 3 million tonnes over the next decade. That is a lot of steel: 3 million tonnes of steel is worth upwards of £2.5 billion in value. That shows the opportunity of steelmaking, and it also shows the degree of risk and vulnerability we will be exposed to if we do not have our own steelmaking capacity. I was very pleased to sign the charter, and I was pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), also signed it. The Secretary of State has made it very clear that the Government intend to push forward with doing everything they can to improve performance on procurement.

The third ask was about business rates. The plant in Scunthorpe—this goes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East about the size of these industrial sites—it is actually about the size of the town of Scunthorpe itself, and is bigger than the borough of Chelsea and Kensington, so this is a big bit of land. The site in Ijmuiden in the Netherlands, its sister site when we were part of Tata, is even larger—I think it is about three times as big—but the site in the Netherlands pays lower business rates than we do here in the UK. The playing field is not level, and we need to level this playing field. Despite the actions of North Lincolnshire Council to try to ensure the most effective business rates regime, the current framework of business rates means that the penalty for steelmakers is still very high.

Again, I come back to the point I made earlier about how these are businesses and industries that are in places: we cannot move the asset around the world to dodge taxes. That makes it easy for them to be taxed, but, frankly, why should these businesses be paying more of a burden than companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook, which are fleeter of foot because their assets are of a different nature and they are not place-bound? That is a challenge, and it is one we still have. This playing field needs to be level.

The fourth ask was to take action to make sure that steel could not be dumped in the UK from markets where it is being produced at below the rate of production. To be fair, the UK Government did support the European Union in putting stronger tariffs and stronger defence instruments in place to protect steel from coming in—particularly from China, but from elsewhere as well—and that has had an effect. However, as we come out of the European Union, it is important that the Trade Remedies Authority remains vigilant on dumping, and that the current 40-plus trade defence instruments in place in Europe move across to protect our steel industry. That is particularly the case given the actions we see being taken in the United States and the problem of steel displacement, with steel that would be going to the United States trying to come into the UK and Europe.

My fifth ask was about research and development, and the environmental improvements that are needed. The Government have done some things on that, but they could do more. It is important that our steel industry is efficient compared with steelmaking elsewhere in the world. Indeed, it must become ever more efficient so that it can be part of a future green industry, and contribute to our future in an effective way.

After the new Government were elected, in 2016 they created—to applause from Opposition Members and, I hope, from Government Members—a Department that included the phrase “industrial strategy” in its title, and recognised the need for such a strategy. I had hoped for fast progress on a sector deal for steel to address some of the underlying issues, but, sadly, such progress was not as brisk as one would have wished. We are still talking about the need to progress a sector deal for steel, and we now have this crisis in our midst. Had we had such a deal to address some of the underlying issues, I am optimistic that we would have been less likely to have this crisis. The Secretary of State needs everybody’s support and commendation for his efforts to ensure a positive outcome to the current crisis, but I hope that he and his team will also move forward with work towards a proper sector deal, so that the fundamental issues can be addressed.

Let me conclude by considering the current crisis and challenges. British Steel is a sound and effective business, and it has made a lot of progress over the past three years since the change of ownership. It has become much slicker. Steel is a cyclical business—enough money must be made when at the top of the cycle to get through the bottom of the cycle, but the business will make money. Steelmaking also needs a lot of investment to keep it at the edge of best production. It is a hungry business, but it is a good business.

The uncomfortable truth is that this current crisis would not have happened if we had not decided to leave the European Union, and then made a mess by not getting on with it. That has created uncertainty, in particular with the threat of a no-deal exit, which everyone in steelmaking agrees would be bad news for our ability to keep our steel industry in good shape. I shall not linger on that, however, because the important point is to focus on where we go next.

Other questions probably need to be asked. For example, people have raised various questions about whether Greybull Capital has acted as a good steward of the business, and there are concerns about why the UK appears to find it more difficult than some of our European neighbours to provide support within the state aid rules. Those questions have been raised, and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee might wish to consider them, as that would be the appropriate vehicle to look into and scrutinise those issues.

Now is not the time for looking backwards; now is the time to look forwards. British Steel has a team in place from the official receiver to run it, and we need to keep the business going until new owners are found. From listening to the Secretary of State yesterday, I understand that his interest is to take this business forward as a going concern into the future. The management team, trade unions and the Government are working urgently with the receiver to ensure that this business goes forward strongly. Leadership at a local level is provided by the management team, led by Gerald Reichmann. The unions have also provided support,
and Paul McBean, Ian Smith, Martin Foster and other colleagues have made a real difference in taking forward a difficult situation, and building a determination to ensure that this business, this industry, has a positive future.

The last thing I want to say is that I would like to thank all the people who have contacted me and the steelworkers, locally and in the supply chain, to express their support and solidarity from across the country and across the community. That means a lot to people. It means a huge amount to people that everybody cares. And because everybody cares, I am confident about our future: I am confident about steelmaking in Scunthorpe, in Teesside, in Skinningrove, in the United Kingdom in the future. The emblem on Scunthorpe Borough Council's mast was “The heavens reflect our labours”. Let us hope the heavens are on our side as well.

3.15 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). He described what we had experienced in the Chamber to the point at which he stood to speak as a masterclass. And that masterclass continued. This is the first time that I decided to attend a recess Adjournment debate and I have learned a great deal about how to make the best use of the time afforded by such debates. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) gave us a very thorough commentary on his constituency. I know a little about Gateshead and I have to say that the people of Gateshead are some of the friendliest and most welcoming in these islands. I always look forward to my visits to Gateshead to visit friends who live there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) gave a tour de force. I am taking notes about what I observed in how he conducted himself. I share his concerns about the state of our democracy. I am really concerned about the esteem in which people hold this place and I am deeply concerned about some of the comments I pick up every Saturday when I knock on doors in my Stirling constituency. We desperately need to consider the reputation of Parliament and the way in which we have conducted ourselves over the past little while.

There was a mention from across the Chamber of sporting triumphs. It would be remiss of me not to wish my namesake Shelley Kerr, the manager of Scotland's World cup team, all the very best when the tournament starts next month in France. I am sure that all of us will have marked in our diaries a very important date and time, Sunday 9 June at 5 o'clock, because that is when England will be beaten by Scotland in the women's World cup. I wish the Scotland team well. It is fantastic, as a Scot, to be able to have a national team in a World cup—in fact, in any kind of tournament at all. I rejoice in their success in being in it and I know they will do us proud.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe mentioned steel and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I note what he said. I am a member of the Committee and he asked some very valuable questions. As I mentioned, this is the first time that I have attempted to speak in a recess Adjournment debate. If you do not mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to reflect on the fact that, just after we come back from recess, it will be a few days more to the second anniversary of my election to this place as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, and the election in which the hon. Member first came to the House in 2017. I want to use this opportunity to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, the officers and staff of the House, and our Members for the many kindnesses and considerations I have experienced and been shown over the past two years. I am absolutely certain that I speak for the whole 2017 intake when I say that.

I never tire of the privilege of being a Member of this House and representing the people of the Stirling constituency. What can I say about Stirling? Every day when I walk to this place, I choose, whenever I can, to walk through Westminster Hall. There are several plaques in the floor of Westminster Hall. I always take time to reflect on and show my visitors the plaque that designates the spot where William Wallace stood when he was sentenced to death by this English Parliament. I mention that because Stirling is the home of the National Wallace Monument, where I recently witnessed the reality of the Union, which is my main topic this afternoon. At the monument, which will be 150 years old this year by the way, there is a 14-foot-tall statue of William Wallace, which has been in place for 132 years. It bears the effects of being that old, so it was recently taken down from the monument and repaired. That was a very worthy project and I salute all who were connected with it, but the repair—bear in mind the history of William Wallace and the nature of the plaque in the Westminster Hall floor—took place in Wigan, in England. I am not sure what the spirit of William Wallace would make of that; nevertheless, I felt that it surely represented something about our United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Gateshead reminded us, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, that we are in this place not for the purposes of self-aggrandisement, but to serve others, without a selfish motive or agenda, and to seek to do good to all people. We are reminded of that every day that we attend Speaker’s Prayers and by this building and everything about it. We need those reminders, because passing laws, holding the Executive to account and speaking truth to power and patronage is fundamentally about serving people and seeing that their needs are best served by the actions of Government.

I will take a few minutes of the House's time to speak about good governance. I have said many times in this House that I do not always feel that my constituents and the people of Scotland are being best served when it comes to governance. When I say governance, I mean the system of government at all levels and how they work together to serve the best interests of the people. There are many examples of where Government serve the people well. I specifically mention the dedicated and skilled public servants that I have witnessed working hard in various activities. This includes teachers, people who provide care in our health service, the police and the fire service, and we undoubtedly have the best armed forces and the best consular network that we could imagine around the world. We have a great deal to be grateful for. However, my concern is that when Government do not work together and when they pass the buck—when citizens are told, “It’s not my job to do this or that”—that is when people are poorly served. Whether that is different Departments or arms of a
single Government, or different levels of Government not acting together, it amounts to poor service and poor governance.

In Scotland, we have a situation where the idea of disharmony and not working together is the aim of public policy. The Scottish National party Government delight in telling the people of Scotland what cannot be done. They love to tell us that they do not have the power to do this, that or the next thing and they delight in telling us that it is someone else’s fault. They love to tell us, “Actually, it is Westminster’s fault.” I refer to my earlier comments in reflecting that what the people of Scotland have witnessed in this Parliament in recent months and years has added evidence, unnecessarily, to support these spurious claims about blame. The manufacture of grievance is what nationalists are all about. We should remember that the only reason they manufacture grievance and the reason they love to blame is that they wish to use it to advance their argument for independence. They exist only to create division and sow discord. It is their modus operandi; it is the means to the end that they seek.

Let me say straight away that it is simply not good enough for me, as a Scottish Conservative and Unionist, to point that out and to despair at the SNP, the way it wants to do Scotland down and its incessant negativity. That is not enough. The SNP may be seeking to build walls between people, but we in this place must be determined to build bridges. We need to be the people who engage positively with the issue of governance throughout the United Kingdom. I believe that it is time for a positive Unionism to be active in the lives of my constituents and the people of Scotland—a positive Unionism that is designed to make life better for our citizens; a positive Unionism that shows the people of Scotland and the people of Stirling that there is a real benefit to being part of the Union.

For me, the key to unlocking that demonstration of benefit is to work together across all Administrations in the United Kingdom to create partnerships. We have seen that for ourselves in Stirling, where the city region deal brings together local authorities and the Scottish and UK Governments. They have to work together, to sit down together, to talk to each other and to make agreements about how to transform the Stirling economy and the lives and life prospects of the people of Stirling. I should mention that that also applies to the constituency of my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

What we need is more joint enterprise between Governments. To make that happen, I believe we need reform. It is imperative that we view such reform not simply as a fix for process and bureaucracy that allows people to fall between the stools, but as a bulwark against grievance-based nationalism. In short, we need to modernise the Union, and the emphasis should be on the delivery of good governance.

I am grateful that my views on good governance are not my views alone, but are shared by many Members on both sides of the House. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was very pleased to join the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray)—a Scottish Conservative, a Scottish Liberal Democrat and someone from Scottish Labour—to publish a joint article in *Scotland on Sunday* about good governance for Scotland. I would like to share with the House some of our conclusions about what good governance means. We said that we share a common interest in making a “passionate, positive and heartfelt case for Scotland’s integral role in the United Kingdom”.

We see it as a fundamental part of our jobs as Members of this House to make that positive case. We concluded that it has never been more important to make the positive case for the Union because the SNP, under Nicola Sturgeon, is once again making reckless demands for another independence referendum. We said in the article:

“We believe in the UK not just because it is the most successful union the world has ever seen,”—

and it is—

“but because of how we see it improving and responding to the political, cultural, and social demands of a new era.”

That new era is being brought about because of our departure from the European Union and the new powers that will be transferred from Brussels to Holyrood. More than 80 powers will be transferred from Brussels to Holyrood, and that is on top of the other powers that the Scottish Parliament has been granted in recent years, including powers on welfare.

If I may, I will conclude with a short extract from the article. I believe that these words are worthy of the House’s attention because they are cross-party and, above all else, they are heartfelt words from Scots who care deeply about the Union and the future health and prosperity of the United Kingdom.

Our article said:

“We must be creative in finding solutions to modernising the Union. As a result of our asymmetrical devolution, one challenge is that with many of the powers which may come back to the UK from the EU we will find that some ministers in Westminster will be responsible both for UK common market cohesion, as well as the specific policy framework for England. It creates a conflict of interests, to which”—

“federalism is one solution. The other would be the creation of a Department for the Union to act as an arbiter.”

I would ask those on the Treasury Bench to seriously consider this policy idea.

**Mr Sweeney:** The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting series of proposals and he opens up an interesting discussion. However, the integrity of the United Kingdom is dependent on its being functional and serving a real purpose that means something in people’s lives, and the ongoing constitutional Punch and Judy show that is going on in Scotland right now is ill serving that objective. Does he not agree that we need to move away from the yah-boo polarisation of constitutional obsession in Scotland and focus on delivering policies that improve the quality of life of people in Scotland, and then demonstrate the value of solidarity?

**Stephen Kerr:** I welcome that intervention. In fact, that is exactly what I am saying. Speaking as a Conservative and a Unionist, I wish that we could get past all the unending and, frankly, fruitless discussions about constitutional arrangements, and talk about policies that improve the life opportunities of people in Scotland. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, but we need to address the issue of the governance of Scotland to be able to bridge the gap, in constitutional machinery.
terms, that allows the SNP the breathing space to fester the grievances that it is busy manufacturing while he and I are sitting here.

Our article goes on to say that the Department for the Union
“could be part of the constitutional jigsaw that would solve some of the problems the country will face in the future if they are not addressed. This department would be of such importance that we suggest the leader of it should be one of the five great offices of state: joining Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary. They would be supported by a group of senior ministers representing Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

A Department for the Union at Whitehall would be responsible for maintaining and enhancing the regulatory and governmental framework of our United Kingdom. Hearing the voices of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish ministers, businesses in each sector, and civic bodies would allow for a regulatory framework

...
There are volunteers out there helping—particularly volunteers from the 3 million in my area—but local advice and digital assistance for those who need it must be put in place as soon as possible. The applications are almost entirely digital, which can present barriers to those without digital skills. Community associations have provided me with a number of examples of applicants being unable to upload documents and being removed from the system at various stages due to technical difficulties. The system does not appear to be easy to navigate. I understand that an announcement was made yesterday on grants for organisations that can provide help, but they will need time to prepare and the services might not be available until the summer. Also, the announcement did not include smaller community groups, and it would be really helpful if the Minister would ask the Government whether a separate announcement could be made on this.

One piece of feedback that I would urge the Home Office to take notice of is that the first three stages of the application are in English, whereas the remaining stages are available in EU languages. If all the stages were available in EU languages for those who want them, that would go some way towards removing these barriers. I hope that it will be possible to get more information from the Home Office about that. The Government clearly have confidence in how the scheme is running so far, but they need to be aware of the fear and uncertainty among those who were not first off the line to try the application, and among those who have tried it and struggled. Please can these comments be passed on to the Home Office so that we can improve the system and help those who are struggling?

Given that there has been a lot of talk about football today—I missed out on that at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions—and that I had the great pleasure of welcoming Norman Parselle and Dan Williams from Newport County in the Community to Parliament yesterday, I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Newport County’s season and wish them all the best in the play-offs at Wembley this Saturday. Whatever happens, they have done our city proud.

3.41 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). She gave us a second commentary on the plight of the steel industry, and also made a powerful case for her constituents’ ability to stay, work and live in the United Kingdom. I hope she has a good weekend with the football. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made an excellent speech, and I was pleased to hear about the joint article from him and other colleagues in Scotland on Sunday. He has saved me having to look it up in Scotland on Sunday, because I have heard it now! He made a powerful argument, and I was pleased to hear it.

I want to take this opportunity to raise a number of issues, but I will do so briefly. First, I want to talk about the British sign language GCSE. Many colleagues have been campaigning alongside the deaf community for that qualification, but I have to say that the Government have been resisting it for a number of years. They recently signposted some progress, but there are now suggestions of some element of delay. I hope that that is not the case, because the lack of such a qualification discriminates against deaf children, for whom British sign language is their first language. Their colleagues at school can learn Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Italian and French, but they cannot learn British sign language. This deprives them of an opportunity to further their education, and it prevents the UK from getting many more qualified signers, of which we have a shortage. I would be grateful if the acting Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), could comment on this. I have to say that he made an impressive debut at this morning’s business questions. He said he was re-finding his voice, and I am glad that he has done so. It was a very good performance, and I wish him every success in his position. I would be grateful if he could pass on my concerns about the BSL GCSE to the Department for Education.

Ian Mearns rose—

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am happy to give way to the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns: I have been campaigning with Jim on this very issue. Young people who are deaf can communicate in British sign language, but they are not allowed to take a GCSE examination in their own first language. That is plainly anachronistic and wrong, and the situation needs to be rectified. The Department has been working on this, but if there is some kind of fly in the ointment, it needs to be sorted out quickly. We need to give those young people the opportunity to take an examination in their own language.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman clarify that, when he mentioned who he had been working with, he meant the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)?

Ian Mearns: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did indeed mean that I had been doing some work with my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thought that that was who the hon. Gentleman meant, and I am glad that he has clarified that.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for being given the appropriate title, but that was a commentary on the familiarity of the Toon Army. You just cannot teach some people—[Laughter] No, I should not say that.

I am grateful for the excellent support from my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and so many other colleagues in the House who have been pressing the Department for Education on the BSL GCSE. We hope that we will follow Scotland and be able to deliver it in due course.

I chair Fire Aid, which offers fire and rescue service and fire industry support for emergency services in 50 other countries. I know that the Department for International Development recently reviewed its policy on support for small charities such as ours that do invaluable, life-saving work, but we cannot deliver more without revenue support, which DFID will not provide. I hope to meet the appropriate Minister soon to discuss the matter. I know how difficult it is to get revenue support from the Government, but small charities and soft diplomacy can deliver for UK plc, so the Government and DFID need to review the situation.
What a disappointment it is that the opening date of Crossrail—the Elizabeth line—has been put back by at least a year. Canary Wharf Group took responsibility for the construction of the station at Canary Wharf in my constituency, and it has been ready for some years. If the rest of the line had been constructed with the same speed and efficiency, Crossrail would have opened on time.

There is an ongoing issue with the Charity Commission and the Island Health Trust in my constituency. Charity commissioners have been monitoring the charity’s governance and financial administration since February 2017, when concerns were raised about the use of the charity’s funds and the potential private benefit to one or more of the trustees. The then chair, Suzanne Goodband, was paid nearly £350,000 through a company of which she was the sole director, with that amount representing 68% of the charity’s income over two years. At the same time, GPs and the health practice were being priced out of their building through rent rises. I secured an Adjournment debate in March last year and have been in regular contact with the charity commissioners, but after 18 months the Charity Commission still cannot provide a final timetable for when it will publish its findings. I hope that we will get something within the next week.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made a welcome announcement on 9 May about funding for the removal and replacement of defective cladding on private tower blocks. The all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform, the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the National Leaseholders Campaign and many other stakeholders have been tirelessly campaigning for a resolution. Questions about the scheme remain unanswered, including what the money will cover and how to apply for it, and a number of letters have gone to the Housing Minister to seek clarification, but I commend the Secretary of State for his decision. I know that he had to give direction to civil servants, which demonstrates his personal commitment, and we look forward to more information soon.

That brings me on to the governance and regulation of housing associations. The current position would benefit from more transparency than exists at present. Post-Grenfell, the Government have engaged in a complete overhaul of much of the regulation of housing tenure, and the focus on leasehold is welcome. However, a review of housing association accountability would be equally welcome.

On leasehold reform, there is growing anticipation that something is about to arrive after 30 years and various attempts by both main parties to improve rights and protection in regulations for leaseholders. I thank the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and campaigning organisations for their reports. The Committee’s excellent recent report has been welcomed by the Government, and I look forward to their response and to a debate, either in here or in Westminster Hall, before the summer recess.

The 52:48 result meant that Brexit was never going to be easy, and diametrically opposing views—from hard Brexit to wreck Brexit—have only exacerbated the situation. I said in the Chamber on 11 December that I was moving to support the Government’s deal, and I eventually did support it when I felt that the Labour’s five points were met—first there were six, but then it was five. We wanted a customs union—not the current customs union—a trade arrangement, protocols for security, protection for the Good Friday agreement, and an implementation period, and all that had mostly been met by the Government. From that point, there should have been closer alignment between the two Front-Bench teams, but that has not been the case. Now, with the spectre of a second referendum being much stronger for Opposition Members, 31 October looms. That is not a good position to be in, and hopefully the Prime Minister, or the new Prime Minister, will be able to move on and avoid a no-deal scenario, which is the worst of all positions as far as I am concerned, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) articulated earlier.

The Government have announced the fair funding review. My local authority, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, has lost £148 million—64% of its revenue—since 2010. Mayor Biggs, Councillor Ronald, Chief Executive Tuckley and their colleagues and staff are doing an excellent job of trying to provide services, but they need resources to do the job properly. I hope that the Government will look again at support for urban local authorities and not just for the English shires.

I commend Tower Hamlets for its efforts to keep the borough clean. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnbury (Victoria Prentis)—I apologise for not informing her that I would be mentioning her—and Keep Britain Tidy on the Great British spring clean, which is an excellent initiative. Support has been growing exponentially among local authorities, and I look forward to supporting her again next year. Keep Britain Tidy’s strong work continues, especially on fly-tipping.

The hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), as Minister for road safety, had been expected to make a renewed road safety statement soon. The fall in the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads has stagnated for a number of years, and the new statement is anticipated eagerly. It has been promised for some months, and it is certainly imminent. We look forward to it.

I have notes of congratulation on two retirements. Colonel Dick Harrold has served as governor of the Tower of London since 2014, and he ends his service next year. The Tower of London is in my constituency and forms its western boundary. I could not have a stronger redoubt than the Tower of London to protect me from the rest of the capital. Dick Harrold has done an excellent job, and I wish him every success and happiness, and a long retirement.

I also congratulate Philippa Helme, one of our Clerks. Many tributes were paid to her earlier. She stopped me in the corridor this morning to wish me well on a piece of work I have been engaged in for a number of years, and it is a measure of her kindness and generosity that she wished me good luck. She is going to sail around Britain for the next three months with her husband, and I wish her every happiness in her retirement and safe sailing.

Philippa Helme is escaping at a good time. As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, the House is not a very nice place at the moment. This is the longest Session since the 17th century and the least productive since 1926, according to recent media.
reports. I am reassured by his comments that it is not just me, because I do not think this is a good place to work at the moment. I have loved my job more than I do at present, just as I loved my job at London fire brigade. The stress, the pressure and the expectations on all of us are very great. Relationships are fracturing and there are all kinds of fallout. I think we are letting down our citizens, and we need to do better.

I somewhat echo the words of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in saying that good governance is not assisted by pointing our finger at others, whether that is within our parties or across the Chamber, or whether we are blaming somebody else. We are paid to sort out these problems, and we are not doing our job, which reflects badly on all of us. Perhaps when we come back after Whitsun—I mean no disrespect—the Conservative party and Parliament will sort themselves out and we can provide the leadership that this great nation needs and that we are currently failing to deliver.

3.54 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to you for the opportunity to take part in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a good number of years since I last spoke in one of these Adjournment debates. In one of the first ones I spoke in, we were squeezed out to such an extent that I got to speak for 30 seconds at the end of it. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was the Deputy Leader of the House at the time, and I managed to give 30 seconds on the subject of powdered whisky, an abomination then, and today, I am sure. Returning to this debate after some years, it was refreshing to see that the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) still sees it as an opportunity to catch up on his casework. In an ever-changing world—others have spoken about the difficulties in the House at the moment—that one small piece of continuity provides a small measure of reassurance for us all.

I had hoped not to be here today—I mean that in the nicest possible way—but unfortunately an air traffic controllers strike is taking place in the highlands and islands so I was moved to take part in this debate, as a consequence of a meeting I had this morning. The right hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) spoke in detail and with great knowledge about the steel industry, which is undergoing a moment of crisis. I very much associated with the way in which he spoke about that industry, because my communities in Shetland and in Orkney feel much the same about the fishing industry as his communities obviously do about the steel industry. In many ways, fishing defines what we are, because we are, of course, island communities. It pains me that I have to return today to a subject I have spoken about in the House previously—at numerous Question Times and in the two Adjournment debates I have had on the subject, one in July and one in April. I refer to the issue of visas for non-European economic area nationals seeking employment in the fishing industry.

We are reaching a point of crisis. The dependence on non-EEA nationals for crew of many of the small inshore boats is such that the boats are being tied up; they cannot get the crew and they are looking at being sold on. When that happens, no fish are being landed in the individual ports, which means that the fish processing factories will eventually find other things to do. In that way, an important part, economically and culturally, of our coastal and island communities around the UK is under threat. I fear that this is the sort of thing that in normal politics would have been sorted out months ago, but unfortunately we are in this phase where things that ought to be routine and capable of being managed somehow just do not come out the other end of the sausage machine.

At the moment, the only non-EEA nationals who have been able to get in to crew fishing boats are ones who come into the country on transit visas and who are then fishing outside the territorial waters. There is an irony here, in that these fishing boats are forced to fish outside the territorial waters but Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is now saying that their crew will be treated as though they were fishing within the territorial waters, so they are being taxed even though they are not being allowed to work within this country. For the white fish boats and the pelagic boats, which are bigger, go away for longer and work outside the 12-mile limit, these things are manageable, because they are bigger boats. The small inshore boats simply cannot work in that way, so, again, they are the ones being pushed out. Even the white fish boats and the pelagic boats are now being pushed into fishing where immigration regulations will allow them to fish, not where they know the fish are there to be caught. If ever there were a case where regulation was the tail wagging the dog, it is this.

Along with other Members—the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has been with me on many occasions, as have the hon. Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I have been on delegations that have gone through the revolving door that has been the Immigration Minister’s in recent years, but we have been pushed from pillar to post. Most recently, the current Minister for Immigration, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), explained that the Government had decided not to change their position on these visas because of the advice given by the Migration Advisory Committee.

The Migration Advisory Committee is an independent body, and I have recently taken some time to consider its composition and work. This morning, I was delighted to welcome to the House of Commons the chairman of the committee, Professor Alan Manning, and several of his advisers and staff from the committee’s secretariat. Initially, I was encouraged by their willingness to come to Parliament to meet me and others who represent coastal and island interests. I was grateful for the work of the Fishermen’s Welfare Alliance on bringing together to Parliament to meet me and others who represent these things are manageable, because they are bigger boats. The small inshore boats simply cannot work in that way, so, again, they are the ones being pushed out. Even the white fish boats and the pelagic boats are now being pushed into fishing where immigration regulations will allow them to fish, not where they know the fish are there to be caught. If ever there were a case where regulation was the tail wagging the dog, it is this.

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According to its own annual report last year, the MAC cost 893,467 taxpayer pounds to run, which is not insubstantial. Its membership comprises three professors, two doctors and one lonely individual who does not seem to have any academic title to append to her name. Two are based in London, one in Southampton, one in Warwick, one in Oxford and one in York—the most northerly of its members. This body, which is supposed to advise the Government on how to regulate immigration policy in relation to my community, has no member who works north of a point that is some 500 miles south of the southernmost point of my constituency—and remember that the southernmost point of my constituency is some 200 miles south of the northernmost point of my constituency. Does that not hint at the problem? This is an advisory committee composed of academics, not one of whom is based anywhere north of York. That surely has to change.

I hope that this message will be heard in the Home Office. One of the principles that apparently guides the work of the MAC is diversity. I am afraid that a committee of six academics, all of whom are based between Southampton and York, whatever the gender balance, is not one I could regard as being diverse. I hope that within the Home Office the message will be heard today that the problem of fishing visas, which I have spoken about many times, is not going away but is getting worse. Ministers have got to take responsibility because it is apparent to me that the advice they are getting from those whom they pay to give that advice is not of a quality that is fit for purpose.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow many interesting speeches, which have focused on great priorities that we ought to debate in this House. My time in this Parliament has been dominated by one massive issue—a constitutional impasse—and I lament the fact that it has displaced so many fine, pertinent and vital matters that should be the focus of our democracy and national life. I hope that improvements to our leadership and the country’s governance will help us to get back on track. I hope that our focus will shift from that constitutional impasse back to meaningful societal improvements that will determine our quality of life.

I am well aware that there is an election going on today, and Members of the House are thinner in number than they would otherwise be. We should pay tribute to the thousands of activists who are out there pounding the pavements for their respective parties as we speak. It is easy to forget the huge amount of unpaid, and often uncredited, work put in by so many people who are committed to our political life. Although it is fashionable to be cynical about politics, we should take the time to pay tribute to all who put gargantuan amounts of effort into participating in our political life and political parties, of whatever colour.

I am thinking particularly of Angela Bretherton, a local activist from Dennistoun, in my part of the world, who is standing for the first time as a Scottish Labour MEP candidate. She is an amazing Unison trade union official who fought for equal pay for women workers in Glasgow who were denied justice for many years, and that was integral to achieving that gain for women workers. That is a small flavour of the huge, rich tapestry of our democracy, and I give all credit to those involved.
While we are focused on the Punch and Judy show of constitutional politics, I was intrigued by some of the proposals from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). There is ongoing debate in the Labour party about how to cut through the binary discourse that has dominated politics in Scotland for so long. The nationalists are focused on one political objective alone—destroying the United Kingdom—but there is a danger that another form of nationalism will feed off that nationalism, and it is important that we guard against that. To be frank, I think the Conservative party in Scotland has often benefited from defining itself in opposition to the nationalists by merely bringing nationalism of another colour into the debate, and it is important for the party to be conscious of that.

I was very moved by what Gordon Brown said this week, namely that that Punch and Judy show is destroying the fabric of our political discourse, particularly in Scotland. We need to get back to discussing the important issues, including performance in public life. The reality is that the current situation is a function of two Governments that are failing the public by obsessing about constitutional issues to the exclusion of other things. I hope that we can move beyond this impasse and reboot our politics. If we can focus on something other than constitutional issues, perhaps we can turn the tide.

In my time in the House, I have tried to focus on representing my constituents as best I can, because I understand why they sent me here. As I alluded to in my maiden speech, I understand that they yearn for a political system that shifts power, wealth and control in their favour, and that is what we should focus on. The bulk of my casework stands as testament to that. Most of it relates to political failure and failure of governance—primarily at the Home Office, with the huge amount of suffering caused by our dysfunctional and appallingly callous immigration and asylum system, which I have to deal with on a case-by-case basis as an MP. I resent having to do that because it is actually a symptom of me having to firefight the failure of the Government. They are causing so much hardship to people, who have a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads every day. These people do not know what their future will be, whether they will go back to their torturers or the people who killed their families. It is appalling. I represent one of the few areas in the country with an asylum dispersal area, so I have to deal with these issues all too frequently.

I also have to deal with a lot of failure of the Department for Work and Pensions. The transition to universal credit and changes to disability benefits have been disastrously managed and are visiting a lot of harm on people. The barometer for me is to ask, “Who is coming to see me? Who is suffering? Why did they resort to seeing their MP about these issues?” The answers to those questions tell me that there is a real problem with the way in which the Department is functioning, and we need to focus on how to fix that problem. We cannot simply be here to reflect prejudices and reactionary politics. We should be led by evidence and an understanding of what will improve the general happiness, contentment, wellbeing and prosperity of all parts of our country and society. If we can agree on that, we should recognise and be aware of the failure of current policy; I hope that we can do that.

After that rather despondent sermon, it is also important to recognise that there are lots of people and organisations working really hard to do what they can—in whatever small way they can—to improve the condition of our communities and society. I can think of a few in my own constituency. This work happens in the face of huge cutbacks to councils, which were seen to happen disproportionately to councils in Scotland. Since austerity, amplified by a Government in Edinburgh, Glasgow City Council has seen a percentage cut seven times the size of that to the Scottish Government. A big part of that has been the withdrawal of services such as music tuition in schools, but there is a great organisation in my constituency called the Beatroute Arts Centre, which has been providing huge opportunities for young people, including creative outlets and tuition in the face of the funding cuts.

Bolt FM is part of a local church in my constituency and has been around for 18 years, involving young people in opportunities that they might not otherwise have—for example, presenting their local community radio station and going to Africa to work with local communities there on how to build their resilience. It is a wonderful, fantastic example.

We often tie together cuts with the problems faced by constituents who have a low disposable income and might be suffering poverty, but there is also the issue of trying to be environmentally friendly. How do we turn that into a positive thing for those people? My constituent Donna Henderson set up the Balornock Uniform Bank. Donna’s idea was to give back to her community by organising the donation of good-as-new school uniforms and other children’s clothing, and offering them to other families for free in an exchange. Young people are growing at a very fast rate, and quickly grow out of their school uniforms, which are often perfectly good to be reused. Rather than throwing these things out, why not recycle them? Donna has actually turned something that might be a source of shame—to have to exchange clothing—into something that is entirely sensible to do. All credit to her for thinking of a great practical intervention that is benefiting my community.

Speaking of credit, I want to mention the urgent need to debate and focus more on the need for credit unions in this country. This House often discusses the transition from banking services to a more cashless society, and the impact that that transition is having on those who are left behind. The extraction of banking services from poorer communities, which is a disproportionate fact of life in this country, has seen a litany of branch closures in my constituency. The latest announcement was the closure of the Santander branch, so I have seen credit unions becoming ever more critical.

I pay particular tribute to the Carnytne and Riddrie Credit Union, which is run by John Lyons. And not only does he run a credit union; he has also set up Glasgow’s first non-referral food bank. When he went to see how a food bank works, he was appalled that one of the questions asked of a lady who went there to seek food with her children was, “Are all the children from the same father?” Does that matter? What on earth is the relevance of that question? Why was that food bank trying to create a source of shame for someone looking for need in the most vulnerable situation? It is already embarrassing for many people having to seek help like that, before having to go through some sort of ritual humiliation by people who just want to exercise power over others in a vulnerable situation. The fact that John Lyons has set up a non-referral food bank is remarkable.
He is also trying to connect people into accessing financial services and has set up a credit union service that is delivering much more than just those services to the community. It is a hub for the community, and he practically lives in that facility. It has been really inspiring to see the work going on there. As MPs, we can be born, live and die in an area but never know half the stuff that is going on. Being an MP is a journey of discovery, as we find out about all the amazing things that are happening, and that is just one example I have encountered in my time.

In my maiden speech—you were in the Chair on that occasion, Madam Deputy Speaker—I mentioned the amber nectar of Tennent’s, which is the oldest business in my constituency and a fine Scottish business. It has been around since 1556, brewing beer on the banks of the Molendinar Burn in Glasgow, and it is one of Scotland’s most iconic brands. It has bred another business adjacent to it: the Drygate brewery. That brewery has been contributing significantly to the local economy, and it is lining up a number of events to celebrate its fifth anniversary this year, which is fantastic. We have been impressed by not only the trade union traditions of that business, but the amazing community work it does quietly to support local people facing hardship. That is just another example of a fantastic, innovative business going hand in hand with compassion for the community.

Businesses face significant hardship in my constituency. Lots of businesses are thriving, and local entrepreneurs are flourishing, despite the hardships, but one big problem they face is punitive business rates. That issue was mentioned in relation to the steel industry, but it also affects small businesses. Business rates are often a blunt instrument that do not reflect a business’s performance. They can often sink a business that would otherwise be entirely viable. I think of Tibo in Dennistoun, a fantastic bistro that celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. It has been tenacious through difficult times, and it is flourishing and doing a great job. When I visit, I am reminded of the looming threat of a revaluation of business rates, which could sink the business overnight. It is difficult for business owners to plan year to year when facing that potential change.

Many of the groups I have mentioned also face a gamble year to year. They spend so much of their time not focused on delivering the services that the community relies on, but thinking about where the funding is coming from for the next year. They spend a huge chunk of their resources and time applying for grants from local councils or Government, just to stay in business. They are living hand to mouth. Would it not be far better to transfer some of the community resource into funds that can sustain all those organisations through all the ups and downs? That event could only be put on through participatory budgeting, which is becoming more fashionable. It involves people voting for what they want funded, but it is often a cover for asking them, “What do you want to be cut?” It passes the buck for who makes cuts. While it has some positive aspects, it should not be regarded uncritically.

Disabled communities are often the ones who are excluded, and it is those with the sharpest elbows who have access to resources and can mobilise their people—it is a popularity contest. That is another example of a problem we need to deal with.

I mentioned at the business question the huge effort going on locally to regenerate the community. Springburn saw 80% of its built environment demolished during the 1960s and 1970s, with a motorway cut through the area and high-rise tower blocks built. A huge amount of physical damage has been caused to it due to wrong-headed urban planning decisions of the time, but the community are determined to fix that. It has been fantastic to see grassroots efforts come to the fore, with the Springburn Regeneration Forum and the Springburn community council set up in the last couple of years. The Springburn Winter Gardens Trust is focused on regenerating the A-listed Victorian glasshouse in Springburn, which was once a great symbol of civic pride in the community, and was built at the height of Springburn’s industrial success, as the centre of Britain’s locomotive building industry. We hope that will rebuild some of the civic pride in the area, with a great effort being led from the grassroots in the community. It is fantastic to see that all happening, and it is something we take as a great source of hope.

There are also organisations helping those in need, including from minority ethnic communities, such as the Glasgow Chinese recreation centre. There is a huge Chinese community in my area whom I have got to know over the last few years, and it has been fantastic to see the rich diversity in the schools in Glasgow, some of which have over 40 languages in them. That is a huge change even in my lifetime—the diversity and the change that has happened in my community—and it has been fantastic to meet those at that the Chinese recreation centre. Indeed, they had a visit from the Leader of the Opposition last year, which they loved. They had their annual general meeting on 22 May. They have made a fantastic contribution, particularly in celebrating the Chinese new year in Glasgow, but also in helping those with issues, particularly those with asylum issues. The Asylum Seeker Housing Project is one example, and it continues to provide essential support to asylum seekers in exerting their housing rights, and to conduct research into living conditions for asylum seekers in Glasgow. That is so often overlooked, particularly given the scandal of potential mass evictions by Serco last year, at the behest of the Home Office. We do need to tackle those issues in our community.

This shows the wealth of all the really positive things that are going on in our communities. We can get hung up on the constitutional impasse in this country, but we need to focus on how we harness the potential of our communities and help all those organisations that are so desperately in need.
4.26 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I again welcome the Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), to the Chamber for this debate? I echo what other hon. Members have said in that he was excellent at the Dispatch Box this morning. Given that he had such a short time to prepare, I think he should have Whitsun off.

This is always a great event in the House, and it is good that the Backbench Business Committee has given hon. Members such an opportunity this time. The number of hon. Members who wanted to speak and raise important issues shows that it was the right decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, mentioned the United Nations rapporteur, and I hope the Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household will raise this issue with his colleagues. He should not just throw it back to the Backbench Business Committee to have a debate, but actually look at the reports that have come from the United Nations rapporteur and give us a debate on that in Government time.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of council tax, and he knows as he has done the hard graft as a councillor, so it is right that we should look at it at some stage. He has an amazing array of concert halls in Gateshead. I have not visited Sage Gateshead, but I would like to. [Interruption.] Yes, perhaps I can now. It is good that the council is investing in Sage Gateshead. He also mentioned the steel industry and the impact on his constituency.

In relation to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), what can I say? He is right to raise our work in Parliament, and with his 36 years here, it is important to hear his views. The way in which the business is brought forward in the House is a matter for the Government, so I hope the Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household will take that back. However, hon. Members are hard-working, and they do their work in lots of different ways and in different places.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the excellent music service he has in his constituency, and about these wonderful visitors to his constituency. He talked about people wanting to be Prime Minister, but he has been here for 36 years, and he could throw his hat into the ring. Just imagine: if he did that, he could sign the decree that would make Southend a city—instantly. He should get all these international visitors to sign a letter, and I am sure many hon. Members could sign a letter, to make Southend a city, particularly as he has an important archaeological find in his city. We want everyone to visit Southend West.

The hon. Gentleman is right. I raised earlier the issue of fire and safety, and I would like to remind hon. Members to take that test. It only takes 20 minutes, and it would be very good if everyone could do that during the Whitsun recess and make this place safer.

What can I say about my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and his fantastic speech? He paid tribute to steelworkers, who are the infrastructure, in all senses of the word, of his constituency and our society. How difficult must it be—he wears it well—to hear the sad stories from some of those workers who do not even know whether they will have a job next week? He has regularly engaged with the steel industry and has regular conversations with Tata Steel, which is also based in his constituency. He is a real fighter for his constituents and the steel industry. His constituents have a great MP, who they know will never give up on saving the steel industry.

This may be the first time that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has attended such a debate. He says that he has been in the House only since 2017, but he is a regular heckler. Indeed, he has been admonished by the Speaker—“Mr Kerr, calm yourself!” He may not know this, but between 2010 and 2015 the Whips used to give a bottle of champagne to every Member named by the Speaker. The hon. Gentleman should raise that issue, because he definitely deserves it. He rightly raised the issue of governance, and it is 25 years since the death of John Smith, who was also interested in that issue and took forward devolution. Perhaps he can do something on that issue—we have all-party groups and Select Committees, and he has a platform as a Member of Parliament should he wish to bring forward new ideas. And of course, as I say to everybody: visit Stirling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) had to leave to catch a train, but she paid tribute to the steel industry in her constituency and raised the topical issue of visas for non-EEA citizens. The fishing industry is important not just for Scotland but for us all, and especially coastal constituencies. He highlighted a flaw in the current criteria for visas—other hon. Members have also raised that issue, and I hope the Home Secretary will take it back. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, I hope the Minister will take that issue back for the Home Secretary to look at again. There are no tolls on the way into Wales any more, so people should be encouraged to visit Wales and Newport—they do not need visas for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) is a serial attender of these Backbench Business Committee debates. Sign language is important, and I also pay tribute to him as the chair of many all-party groups, including on leasehold and commonhold reform, and on tidy Britain. I join him in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—she is no longer in her place—and her good work as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the former Leader of the House. I am not sure whether she will continue in that role, but I wish her well as she performed it assiduously. I say to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that the strike of the air traffic controllers has been to the benefit of the House. He also raised the important issue of visas. I have had representations from people from Stirling, and the fishing industry is important not just for Scotland but for us all, and especially coastal constituencies. He highlighted a flaw in the current criteria for visas—other hon. Members have also raised that issue, and I hope the Home Secretary will take it up. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman never gives up on those issues. Those coastal constituencies are wonderful. “Local Hero” is my favourite film, and my daughter used to love reading about Katie Morag—indeed, I sometimes dip into those books now, just to remind myself how wonderful they are. They are very nice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney)—we seem to have an over-representation of Scottish MPs today!—rightly mentioned the elections today, and once we have finished this debate, any second now, I will leg it up to Walsall to cast my vote. He was right to raise important issues of democracy in his constituency, and we must reflect on that after this election, and consider how to go forward and give everyone a voice as part of our democracy. He was right to say that arts and culture are very important, and he
showed how one person can make a difference. The uniform exchange is a huge thing and will make a big difference to people's lives. Although he said that not many Members are around, this debate was oversubscribed and we are nearly at the time limit. It has been a well-subscribed debate, and I am pleased that hon. Members have stayed to take part.

Everyone has mentioned their favourite football club. I was at the Valley to watch Charlton Athletic go through on penalties, which was very exciting. My husband Paul and my father-in-law John Townsend are both supporters of Charlton Athletic, so I feel I must wish them well on Sunday in the play-offs. Charlton Athletic were the club of PC Keith Palmer. I hope, with him watching down, they do well on Sunday.

Finally, I wish everyone a very happy Whitsun recess. Remember, we do not just finish work, but go back to our constituencies and work. We are constantly looking at our mailboxes. I wish the staff of the House and everyone here a very happy recess.

4.35 pm

The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mark Spencer): As a Forest fan, I don't think I will talk about football at all today.

I thank the shadow Leader again for her kind words, and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for his kind words on my brief appearance this morning during business questions. I am sure the House will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) has been appointed to the position of Leader of the House. I am particularly proud of my political career's ending without any political shenanigans or scandal.

We have had a fantastic debate this afternoon. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), the hon. Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Poplar and Limehouse, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for their contributions.

I particularly enjoyed the start from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, who in his tour de force told us all that is great about Gateshead and made an early commitment not to talk about the “B” word. It was not actually mentioned until much later in the debate, by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. The hon. Member for Gateshead mentioned a lot of the challenges he faces in his constituency and the work he has done. I pay tribute to him not only for his work for his constituency as a Member of Parliament, but for his work as a local councillor. His work demonstrates his commitment to his community and he should be enormously proud of everything he has achieved. He managed to squeeze in references to the Angel of the North and Brendan Foster, who, when I was a young boy growing up, was a real hero of mine; we should recognise his achievements as a UK athlete.

We then moved on to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. I think we can only describe the delivery of his speech as being in the style of a Gatling gun.

It would be impossible for me to reference all the things he spoke about, but it really was a tour de force. He said that he started off in the style of Victor Meldrew. I think he concluded like Victor Meldrew on speed, frankly, as he took us through all the challenges he faces and much of his casework.

My hon. Friend did not miss the opportunity to talk about Southend not becoming a city. I am unsure whether colleagues are aware that he may have raised this issue before in this Chamber. [Laughter.] I am sure that one day that will drip through. He started by telling us that everybody on the Government Benches wanted to be the party leader. I noted that he did not rule himself out. I will take an intervention from him if he wants to rule himself out right now.

Sir David Amess: The shadow Leader of the House tempted me with the thought that if I were to become leader and Prime Minister I would have the power to grant city status to Southend, but, as I think I said in my speech, it is such a shame that people are not aware of their limitations. On this occasion, I admit that I am aware of my own limitations.

Hon. Members: No, no.

Mark Spencer: We live in historic times, Madam Deputy Speaker. I believe my hon. Friend is the first Member from the Government Benches to rule themselves out.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his amazing work on animal welfare. His record stands above that of most Members. He went on to talk about the challenges of alcohol abuse and how we need to make sure we work better. I will be interested to know when the liver test will take place. That might be something I could attend myself, just to make sure I am not in any danger. We are occasionally flippant about some of these things, but they are really important. If we pick up health problems at an early stage, it can have a real impact on the prognosis for people’s health and mitigate some of the impact that such diseases, if undetected, can have later in life.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe made a very eloquent speech. His reasonable approach and tenacity and his pride in the steel industry are a real credit to him. He is viewed warmly on this side of the House. The Secretary of State shares his passion for the steel industry and genuinely wants to try to solve the challenges that it faces. Government Members recognise how important it is that, as an international country, our steel industry will still be there in 20 or 30 years' time. As a Government, we have a responsibility to make sure, with the procurement decisions that we make, that we use British steel and support the industry, so that we are not held to ransom at some point in the future by countries such as the US, China, Germany and Japan, which will have stronger steel industries than us if we do not commit to supporting ours during this challenging time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) started by putting a date in my diary: 9 June, 5 pm, which is when Scotland and England play each other in the women's World cup. He said that Scotland will beat England, and for a moment I nearly shouted “Division!” until I looked around the Chamber and saw that there were more Scots than English here. Sport builds bridges between people. Over the last two or three years,
women’s football has had a meteoric rise. We should be proud of that and I wish all the home nations luck in the upcoming World cup.

The hon. Member for Newport East has gone to collect her children, highlighting that this Parliament is accommodating of all those who have families. I pay tribute to her just for being a working mum and for being an excellent MP for Newport East. She made some very interesting points about EU citizens, and not only the positive contributions that they make but the challenges that the Polish community face, particularly with filling out forms. These are things that we take for granted—the ability to fill out forms in what would be a second language.

Mr Carmichael: In the course of this afternoon, we have heard various reports of a substantial number of EU citizens being denied the right to vote at polling stations. I invite the hon. Gentleman to take this opportunity to make it clear from the Dispatch Box that anyone who is properly registered should be turning up and voting.

Mark Spencer: That is a really important point. At times, we take our democracy for granted. For someone to turn up at a polling station when they have the legal right to vote but to be refused is a very serious matter that we all, across the House, should try to address. I hold my hands up and say to the hon. Member for Newport East that I could not fill a form out in Polish. We need to recognise that we need to assist people in those communities in trying to engage in the system.

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The hon. Gentleman referred to the Elizabeth line, which we are all desperate to see open as soon as possible. It is an enormous engineering feat that is happening right below our feet as we speak. I hope that we will see it open very soon, so that we can all speed up our journey east to west across this great city. The hon. Gentleman was the first person to mention Brexit. I think he just said that we need to get on and get it done. Very few Members would disagree with that view.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is only here because of the air traffic control strike. I seriously hope that that is resolved before the end of the Whitsun holiday, or he will have quite a drive and a row to Orkney if he undertakes the journey. He made some serious points about the need for support in the fishing industry. He recognised the annoyance his constituents must feel when work on a fishing trawler is described as low skilled. I challenge any Member of this House to jump on a fishing trawler and try to operate it. It is a skilled and dangerous occupation.

Those who make decisions on the Migration Advisory Committee should take into account the challenge in that industry. I will do all I can to assist the right hon. Gentleman in making sure that the Home Office recognises the challenge and engages with him. I know that he has had a number of Adjournment debates. My advice to him, as Mr Speaker would say, is to persist and to keep pushing so that eventually the arguments he is making drip in.

Finally, I turn to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, who started by paying tribute to the thousands of volunteers from all parties who are out there banging on doors and getting people engaged in our democratic process. I join him in congratulating and thanking people from all political parties who try, unpaid, to keep people engaged in our political process.

The hon. Gentleman paid tribute to arts centres and churches for all the work they do and the positive impact they have. We sometimes take for granted all the volunteers who work in our communities free of charge, but they do have a really positive impact. We should also pay tribute to the work that he is doing on regeneration, working with planning authorities to make sure that people feel engaged in and have ownership of their communities.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman made reference to Tennent’s brewery, to which I am enormously sympathetic—I may have sampled its products in the past. I was not aware of Springburn glasshouse before today, but it sounds absolutely fascinating. Next time I travel north via Glasgow, I may well be tempted to visit it and to see the impact it is having locally.

We have had an excellent debate and I thank all those who have stopped to participate in it. I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the work that you have done this term, as well as Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers. I pay tribute to all the House staff—the catering staff, the parliamentary security team who keep us safe, the cleaners, the librarians and everybody else who assists us in our work in the Houses of Parliament. I pay my own personal tribute to the staff in the Tea Room, who make my day and lift my mood every morning when I come in for a bit of breakfast.

I wish everyone a restful Whitsun recess. I know that many Members will not be on their sun loungers; they will be out in their constituencies working hard for the communities they hold so dear. I pay tribute to all of them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I think the House should pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for stepping in with no notice and for entertaining and informing us so well today. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.
Excessive Speeding and Driving Bans

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

4.48 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The subject of my Adjournment debate—excessive speeding and driving bans—is very serious. I do not like reading out speeches, but this is a pretty technical issue and there are many factual points that I want to raise, so I apologise in advance that I will be doing a little more reading than I would like. I emphasise that this is an immensely serious issue of great concern around the country. I will be asking three questions at the end of my speech. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer them directly, but if, for any reason, she cannot do so in the detail that we would all like, I would appreciate a written response from her.

I want to emphasise two key points about excessive speeding and driving bans: first, the need for tougher action to tackle speeding offences; and, secondly, the need to explore how technology can be used to improve road safety and reduce the number of unnecessary deaths that occur on our roads. According to the most recent official statistics from the Department for Transport, in 2017, in the UK, there were 24,831 serious injuries in road traffic accidents reported to the police, with 1,793 people killed in road traffic accidents—nearly five people a day. I am worried about the 9% increase in fatalities among motorcyclists and the 5% increase in pedestrian fatalities between 2016 and 2017. While I welcome the slight fall of 4% in fatalities among car drivers, we all know that the figure is still far too high. Any fatality on our roads is one fatality too many.

In 2017, the custody rate for motoring offences was 1%. When an offender was sentenced to immediate custody, the average length of a custodial sentence was only 8.2 months. In 2017, the number of offenders directly disqualified from driving actually decreased by 8%—from 63,000 in 2016 to 58,000 in 2017. This concerns me, and I know it concerns many others, too.

I do not think that any of us will be surprised by the fact that speeding is the most common driving offence on UK roads. It currently accounts for around one fifth of road fatalities. In 2017, across Wales as a whole, 500 drivers a day were caught speeding. I appreciate that velocities differ, and I am concentrating on the highest speeds, but that is still a worrying statistic. In 2017, according to House of Commons Library statistics, just under 20,200 speed limit motoring offences were recorded by North Wales police—a 73% increase on the number recorded in 2011. About 86% of the speed limit offences were recorded through cameras, such as fixed-place speed cameras. Of the 20,200 or so speeding limit offences recorded by North Wales police, most resulted in a fine, with fewer than 3,000 leading to the driver facing court action. The sentence for the vast majority of those who were subsequently convict ed at court was just a fine.

It is my strongly held belief that collisions and road traffic accidents are not inevitable and that we should not accept them as such. Cycling UK has stated that whereas society expects high safety standards in various aspects of our lives in which there are inherent risks, there sometimes seems to be a different culture on the roads. I agree with its calls for greater use of lengthy driving bans, both as a penalty and in order to protect the public. Convicted drivers consistently avoid driving bans by resorting to claims that such a ban will cause them “exceptional hardship”. In January 2017, according to Cycling UK, almost 10,000 drivers were still allowed to drive even though they had amassed 12 points or more on their licence, and that is despite the fact that those who accumulate that many points should automatically face disqualification from driving.

Brake, the road safety charity, has echoed calls for those who have 12 points on their licence to be prevented from invoking the argument of “exceptional hardship” and instead face an automatic driving ban. This is something I strongly agree with. Drivers who have accumulated more than 12 points on their licence have, in my view and that of many others, been given ample opportunity to comply with the law. They have instead shown a repeated disregard for driving safely and legally. I believe that they should not be allowed to continually flout the law and face little more than a fine.

Guidance from the RAC states that if someone has been caught speeding and the offence is referred to court, they could face an instant driving ban. However, magistrates will generally consider imposing a ban only if someone has been caught driving at more than 45% over the speed limit. That means that they would need to be driving at more than 51 mph in a 30 mph limit, 85 mph in a 60 mph limit or—for heaven’s sake—100 mph in a 70 mph limit. There is little uniformity between the speeds offenders drive at or the offences they commit, and the punishment imposed.

Many examples could be cited, but let me set out a couple from north Wales. A motorcyclist who was caught driving at 138 mph in a 60 mph area was banned for 90 days. A driver who was caught at 134 mph in a 90 mph area was banned for 10 months. A driver banned from the A5 near Corwen got a fine of just over £600 and a 90-day driving ban, so he was back on the roads three months later. There was also the driver of what the press referred to as a “supercar”. He was banned from driving for 56 days for driving at 122 mph, again on a single carriageway road with a 60 mph limit.

Last year I submitted a written parliamentary question to ask the Ministry of Justice how many drivers who have been subject to a driving ban go on to commit further driving offences after their ban has expired. I am concerned that the Department’s response was that it does not hold such data.

In the road safety factsheet that it published last year, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents made a very important point:

“There is no doubt that inappropriate speed is one of the most serious road safety problems on Britain’s roads, and causes death and injury to thousands of people each year. Unfortunately, the public has not yet accepted the danger caused by speeding drivers. Convicted drivers consistently avoid driving at or the offences they commit, and the punishment imposed.

Many of us will remember the 1970s and 1980s when there was quite a different culture surrounding drink-driving. None of us would ever want to return to that, but a real case can be made that we are in the same place today in terms of excessive speeds on our roads.

I think it is time for us to review and increase the length of driving bans. I also believe that we need more police monitoring of rural roads. According to the Institute of Advanced Motorists, those are the roads on which most fatal crashes take place. We should also take note of a recent report by Brake, which was based on an
extensive survey of drivers. The report questions whether the legal limit on single carriageway roads should be 60 mph. The Brake report noted that fewer than a quarter of drivers—23%—stated that 60 mph was a safe speed for a vehicle on a road on which there may be people on foot, bicycles and horses. The report also noted that drivers either wanted, or were ambivalent about, a reduction to the default 60 mph limit on rural roads, with fewer than one in five—19%—objecting to a reduction. That survey gives us food for thought.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Susan Elan Jones: The motion lapsed at an extremely convenient time, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I am now moving on to the second part of my speech.

I turn to technology, and specifically what technology now makes possible. I believe that we can and should do a lot more to effectively utilise technological developments so that we reduce the number of driving offences and the casualties that result from them. I know that Ministers have made positive statements in this regard, and I really hope that we can progress well on this.

Intelligent speed adaptation—ISA—is a system that compares the local speed limit to the vehicle speed. As well as advising the driver when they are exceeding the speed limit, an ISA system can limit engine power when necessary to help to prevent the driver from exceeding the current speed limit. The European Transport Safety Council has described intelligent speed adaptation as “probably the single most effective new vehicle safety technology currently available in terms of its life-saving potential.”

The council expects that, with mass adoption and use, ISA could reduce collisions by 30% and deaths by 20%. In June 2015, the London Mayor and Transport for London announced that ISA would be trialled on 47 London buses. According to the results of the trial, which were announced in March 2016, TFL found the technology to be “particularly effective” when buses drove through zones with a 20 mph limit, and the technology ensured that the buses taking part in the trial remained within the speed limit between 97% and 99% of the time. In the light of the trial, TFL has required all new buses entering service from 2017 to have this technology fitted.

The technology is not just applicable to commercial vehicles, and the European Transport Safety Council is calling for ISA to be fitted on all new vehicles as standard. I think that that is an extremely good idea. In France, it is mandatory for all motor vehicles to carry a breathalyser, and fines are imposed on drivers who are found to be in breach of that obligation. A step up from that is an alcohol interlock. Alcohol interlocks are breathalysers that require the driver to blow into a breathalyser before they can begin to drive. If the driver tries to start the car while over the drink-drive limit, the vehicle is immobilised. Let me be clear that I am not suggesting this for all drivers, but there is a strong case for making it a condition that people who have been convicted of drink or drug-related driving offences must use the technology when they get their licence back.

Alcohol interlocks are already mandatory in Belgium for repeat drink-drive offenders. Many other European countries, including Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, have introduced either compulsory or voluntary alcohol interlocks for drink-drive offenders. In the UK, the Durham police force is carrying out a voluntary trial of such devices for those convicted of drink-driving. The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety—PACTS—suggested in its October 2017 report commemorating 50 years of the breathalyser that the UK Government should review the potential role of alcohol interlocks. I strongly agree with that.

According to Wasted Lives, an award-winning young driver education programme, road collisions are the biggest killer of 15 to 24-year-olds in the UK. House of Commons Library research shows that, despite making up only 7% of drivers, young people aged between 17 and 24 represent nearly 20% of people killed or seriously injured in car crashes. Those statistics show that we need more action to keep younger drivers safe. There is also a serious case for a graduated driving licence, and I welcome the UK Government’s pilot scheme in Northern Ireland.

A further measure that could be implemented is the greater use of telematics devices, which track and score individual driving behaviour, with the information then used to calculate insurance premiums. Telematics insurance offers an incentive to drivers to drive carefully and safely, because the better the policyholder’s driving, the lower their premium. Telematics devices can record maximum and average speeds, acceleration, braking, cornering and impact. Research by LexisNexis Risk Solutions concludes that telematics insurance has done more to cut accident risk than any other road safety initiative aimed at the young driver market.

Perhaps the Minister will also consider the merits of using telematics devices to monitor the driving behaviour of those who have previously been banned from driving. It could be made a condition of a licence return following a driving ban that a telematics device is fitted in the offender’s car. Any driver found to be repeatedly driving carelessly or dangerously, and hence continuing to pose a danger to other road users, could then have their licence revoked.

In 2015, a driver on the A495 near Bronington in my constituency was filmed performing two dangerous overtakes on a blind bend. Video evidence of the dangerous manoeuvre was captured by the dash camera of a car behind him, and the footage was used as evidence to secure the overtaking driver’s conviction for dangerous driving. In response to the increasing number of such submissions from members of the public, Operation Snap was launched in December 2017. The initiative was initially devised and piloted by North Wales police and the Road Casualty Reduction Partnership, and has now been adopted across Wales. The campaign allows the public to submit footage from helmet or dash cameras and smartphones to Welsh police forces via a website. The police can then use such footage to investigate and prosecute driving offences.

Since the official launch of Operation Snap, an average of 140 videos and images a month have been uploaded through the website, with the footage used in a number of prosecutions. It is an important initiative. The Transport Committee’s 2016 “Road traffic law enforcement” review concluded that if there is to be effective enforcement of
speed limits as the number of dedicated road policing officers falls, the use of technology will be essential—I totally agree.

I conclude my speech with three main questions for the Minister. First, what will she do to ensure that tougher action is taken to tackle speeding offences, and will she ensure that more lengthy driving bans are awarded? Secondly, will she consider removing the “exceptional hardship” argument as a way for drivers who accumulate more than 12 points on their driving licence to avoid deserved driving bans? Thirdly, what will she do to explore ways in which technology can be used to improve road safety, particularly with regard to European Transport Safety Council recommendations? I look forward to hearing from the Minister, and to us all working together to do whatever we can to stop accidents and fatalities on our roads. It is very important that we tackle this issue.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is good to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this final debate before the recess, which is a good omen for when we return.

I thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for raising the important subject of excessive speeding and driving bans. I also thank her for extending the opportunity for us to continue working together on an issue on which she has not only campaigned for a long time but has been given an award.

Susan Elan Jones: The Minister mentions the award from Brake, the road safety charity, and I pay tribute to the community of Overton in my constituency. There was a terrible road traffic incident, after which the community came together to campaign on this issue. I feel that this very important award belongs as much to my constituents as it does to me.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady, true to form, shares the praise with all those who have worked behind the scenes, which has been noted.

The hon. Lady was probably expecting my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who has been promoted, but I hope she will be pleased with my response. I do not want Hansard or any journalists to be confused: I have not been promoted for long, just for the next 15 minutes.

Road safety is a top priority for the Government. Road deaths are a tragedy for all affected, and injuries can cause suffering and life-changing misfortune. Much of that harm is avoidable, and it is not an inevitable consequence of road transport. As the hon. Member for Clwyd South mentioned, all available research shows a link between excessive speed and the risk of collisions. Increased compliance with speed limits, as part of a wider package of road safety measures, will play a significant role in reducing the number of collisions on our roads.

I share the hon. Lady’s concern that people who drive at appalling speeds, risking the lives of others as well as their own, are too often back behind the wheel too soon. However, sentencing is a matter for our independent courts and is based on the facts of each case. A driving ban, the length of which is at the discretion of the judge, is already an option, and guidance is issued by the Sentencing Council. This is not something on which the Department can intervene. The judiciary are constitutionally independent of the Government, and it is important that no action is taken that may undermine this fundamental principle.

It may help if I say something about the totting up of points. If an offender amasses 12 penalty points or more within a three-year period, a minimum six-month disqualification must be ordered. An offender disqualified in this way may also be ordered to take an extended driving test. Offenders who are disqualified for 56 days or more have to apply for a new licence.

However, courts have the discretion not to disqualify, or to impose a reduced disqualification, if there are mitigating circumstances or exceptional hardship—the hon. Lady raised that issue. This is wholly up to the courts and, again, is not something that the Department can influence, but the Department always notes what is raised in the Chamber. We know the media have reported cases where drivers with many points are still behind the wheel.

At this point I ought to say something about the relative responsibilities of the Department for Transport and the Welsh Assembly. Much road safety legislation and policy is devolved to Wales and Scotland. As well as being responsible for their own trunk road networks, they set policy on safety cameras and issue guidance on setting speed limits. They have legislative competence on all the substantial provisions of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 concerning speed limits and traffic signs.

The enforcement of speed limits is an operational matter for the police. Policing in England and Wales is divided into territorial forces, with the Westminster Government setting policing policy. It is for chief police officers to decide how to prioritise enforcement in accordance with their local priorities and demand. Their police and crime commissioner’s police and crime plan can also be used to address this issue. Individual police forces may also work with local communities and local volunteers to tackle speeding, taking specific local needs into account.

The penalties for excessive speed start with informal advice—the hon. Lady has campaigned on this—because, of course, the more that people are aware, the more they will hopefully monitor their speed. Where such advice is not appropriate, drivers are prosecuted by means of a fixed penalty notice or, in the most serious cases, a postal charge bringing them before the court.

Current guidelines issued by the National Police Chiefs’ Council allow police the discretion to take account of the individual circumstances of each speeding offence, and to take the action they consider appropriate. This ensures that the focus of attention is on the most serious offending and those individuals who clearly and deliberately break the law. The guidelines also seek to provide consistency of treatment from forces in different parts of the country and to set out the principles that underline the police’s approach to enforcement of the law on speeding. However, these are only guidelines, and there are no plans to change this or advise the police how to enforce speed limits.

The hon. Lady mentioned Operation Snap, and I agree with her on the outcomes of that programme. The police have introduced Operation Snap, which has used...
media such as dashcam evidence, helmet cameras or personal video for the detection of road traffic offences that do not involve a collision. I agree that this is an example of innovation that tackles those driving offences that the public want the police to deal with. It also significantly reduces the time for the police to make a decision on an offence. The aim of Operation Snap is to improve driver behaviour. This is important to note, because she spoke about the anti-drink-driving campaigns back in the day, which changed people’s attitudes completely. If drivers perceive that they could be prosecuted for driving poorly, we hope that they will not drive poorly to begin with, thus reducing the likelihood of a collision.

The hon. lady also talked about sentencing and penalties. After a full consultation, in October 2017 the Ministry of Justice confirmed Government plans to introduce life sentences for drivers responsible for the deaths of other road users. The proposals that were confirmed include: increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life; increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years to life; and creating a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. Sentencing remains a matter for the courts, but raising the maximum penalty will give the courts the tools to deal with the most serious cases. The legislation will be brought forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The hon. Lady also made powerful points about drink-driving, and I wish to confirm that the Government currently have no immediate plans to lower the drink-drive limit in England and Wales. Our approach to tackling drink-driving is through rigorous enforcement, penalties and changing the social acceptability of drink-driving in the first place.

The hon. Lady made some good comments about the Brake report, which we welcome as it highlights the important aspects of road safety. Last June, the Government announced their intention to publish the refreshed road safety statement and the two-year road safety action plan later this year, to address four priority user groups: young people, rural road users, motorcyclists and older vulnerable users.

The hon. Lady made some important points about technology. We are currently engaged in negotiations as part of the EU’s third mobility package, which will introduce intelligent speed-adaptation devices in vehicles in the future. She made a powerful point about telematics. I do not want to stray into another Minister’s area of responsibility at the Dispatch Box, so I will offer the hon. Lady the opportunity to meet the relevant Minister once they have settled into their post.

I emphasise that we are determined to improve safety on our roads for all road users, and to see to it that offenders receive the justice that they deserve. I do not doubt that, just like the previous Minister, the new Minister will take this issue incredibly seriously. If I have not covered all the hon. Lady’s points, I will ensure that any that are outstanding are covered in a written response. I congratulate the hon. Lady on being a strong campaigner on this issue and on bringing this important debate to the House.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for all your work, and I thank the Clerks, the Doorkeepers, and everyone who works in the Tea Room and the Library and keeps us going, as well as the wonderful team from the Department for Transport, who keep the Ministers going. I hope that everybody has a wonderful recess, although I am a little nervous because I am being joined by my parents-in-law, Tim and Wendy Wheeldon. They will be spending time with their daughter-in-law, Farah, is going to become a teenager, as she turns 13 on 1 June, so this might not be a quiet recess and I may wish to get back to work sooner than my colleagues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Just before I adjourn the House, I wish the Minister, all her family and everyone who serves this House so well in many, many capacities, a peaceful recess. I also add to the many accolades that have been expressed about Philippa Helme, my most sincere thanks for her calm, wise counsel on many occasions here in the Chamber and behind the scenes. Once again, on behalf of everyone who works here and who serves this place, I thank Philippa for her many decades of dedication to this place and wish her well for an exciting future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 13 May 2019

[SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

Bird Nesting Sites: Protection

4.30 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 244233 relating to protecting nesting sites for birds.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. The petition is titled: “Make ‘netting’ hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting a criminal offence.”

I will aim to reflect that. However, as we found through outreach work by Petitions Committee staff, including the live Facebook chat I held last week, the issue goes well beyond the detrimental effect of netting on nesting birds; netting affects the wellbeing of other wildlife, as well as having environmental consequences.

I am grateful to Margaret Moran for starting the petition, which has attracted in excess of 350,000 signatures. She acknowledges the broader repercussions of netting, stating in the text of the petition: “Developers, and other interested parties are circumventing laws protecting birds by ‘netting’ hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting. This facilitates the uprooting of hedgerows which help biodiversity and provide the only remaining nesting sites for birds, whose numbers are in sharp decline. ‘Netting’ hedgerows threatens declining species of birds, presents a danger by entrapment to wildlife, and produces large amounts of plastic waste.”

No doubt we will hear from colleagues, as I have learned from the public, that the practice of netting also applies to trees, buildings and even sand dunes.

A second live e-petition on bird nesting, which calls for legal protection for swallow, swift and martin nest sites, has more than 70,000 signatures. It was started in reaction to reports of the removal of swift, swallow and martin nests. However, netting is used not just on housing developments but in all kinds of scenarios, including on trees, buildings and even sand dunes.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reports that swift breeding numbers in the UK decreased by 53% between 1995 and 2016, which it attributes partly to the loss of nesting sites. I thank Simon Leadbeater, who started that petition, for raising the profile of that issue.

The practice of netting, especially the netting of hedgerows and trees by developers, appears to be on the increase. Experts say it is driven partly by the irrefutable increase. Experts say it is driven partly by the irrefutable demand for new housing, particularly affordable homes and bungalows. Indeed, The Guardian reported: “The apparent rise in the use of netting this year has been partly fuelled...by a 78% increase in housebuilding over the last five years as developers respond to government pressure to build homes as quickly as possible.”

In the feedback that the Petitions Committee received, there are plenty of examples of the netting of hedgerows and trees up and down the country. In my constituency, a hedgerow was recently covered in green netting on behalf of developers seeking planning permission for up to eight new homes on adjoining land. Workers started to remove the netting and cut down the hedge, which does not require planning permission.

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Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions an important aspect of this issue. Netting is being used more and more, almost as a safeguard—just in case—but it ought not to be. It should really be installed by an ecologist and checked several times a day to ensure that nothing is trapped inside. Developers are far too relaxed in their use of the procedure. It seems to me that there is very little regulation, inspection or checking.

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come on to those issues, but I acknowledge that, sadly, a bird died in her constituency as a result of being trapped in netting.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman may be aware of a recent controversy affecting my constituency, where netting was placed over cliffs before a major project called sandscaping to build up the beaches and improve coastal protection. Does he agree that it is really important that there is close collaboration on such schemes between councils and bodies such as the RSPB to ensure that everything is done absolutely properly to protect birds?

Mike Hill: Yes. I became aware of the Norfolk case through the Petitions Committee’s interactive work, and I was shocked that the practice extended to such schemes. The right hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

As we have seen in reaction to netting across the country, many of my constituents wrote to the council to protest against the installation of nets on the hedgerow in Hartlepool and its effect on wildlife and on birds’ nests. However, netting is used not just on housing developments but in all kinds of scenarios, including on major infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2.

Last month, HS2 contractors began netting hedgerows on the route near Quainton in Buckinghamshire, causing outrage among environmentalists. HS2 contends that all the work is legal, and it has employed an ecologist to monitor the site. In a statement, it said: “The installation of this netting was carried out by HS2 contractors, as part of the pre-works for National Grid’s gas pipeline diversion scheme. This temporary netting is to discourage birds from nesting during construction and was installed before the nesting season started. The netting was installed under the direction of a suitably experienced ecologist and is monitored daily.”

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on opening the debate and I thank everyone who signed the petition. I think he must have read my speech, but the point bears repetition. Does he agree that the Government are the offender here, since HS2 is a Government project, so it is important that the Minister and her Front-Bench colleagues listen carefully to what environmentalists require so that schemes such as HS2 do not continue to murder our wildlife indiscriminately?

Mike Hill: I thank the right hon. Lady for her contribution. It shocked me that this was happening on a Government-led scheme, and that the contractors were working to Government directives on this matter. I hope that is a wake-up call for the management of any future projects of such scale.
In response to the HS2 netting, the RSPB acknowledged that the practice was not illegal, but it said that “careful consideration will be needed to develop rules around netting that really help birds, and allow legitimate activity to continue. But we cannot stand by and let the current practices spread unchallenged.”

Jenny Chapman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for giving way again. I should probably declare that I am a member of the RSPB. Part of the issue is that the use of netting is voluntary, and we use it because we wish to develop. It should be used only when absolutely necessary—when there is no other option and it is in the best interests of wildlife—but almost every time it is used, that is not the case.

Mike Hill: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to the way forward, as the industry describes it, but she is absolutely correct.

Although it is an offence to destroy an active nest, there are currently no laws to prevent the installation of netting. The RSPB and other charities, such as the Woodland Trust, propose changes to current practice and the introduction of laws that commit the Government to ensuring the recovery and protection of nature and wildlife, which would cause practices such as netting to come under much closer scrutiny.

The RSPB went on to say: “We all need nature in our lives—which means giving birds and other wildlife, more, not less room to breed, feed and sing.”

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): There may be some good, practical reasons why the banning of netting in all circumstances would not be either desirable or enforceable, but should we not, at the very least, ban netting during the breeding season?

Mike Hill: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. At the heart of this debate is the fact that the netting typically goes on before the nesting season. That is the whole point of the netting, as far as I can derive, so that proposition is timely and important.

I have spoken to people in the construction industry, who state that the practice of netting is done before the nesting season, always on an ecologically sound footing and in accordance with the law. They claim that netting is applied in a manner that is sensitive to the environment and to wildlife, and under the supervision of specialists. They have raised concerns with me that where wildlife has come under threat or been trapped behind the netting, it is often as a result of the netting being tampered with or shredded after its application.

Current restrictions lead to developers using nets to cover hedgerows and trees in and around their sites before any nesting activity begins, as that could stop or restrict building during the summer months. Legislation protecting nesting birds is pretty much exclusive to section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it an offence to destroy, damage or harm wild birds and nests that are in use or being built; to kill, injure or take any wild bird; to take, damage or destroy the nest of a wild bird; and to destroy an egg of any wild bird. To back that up, Natural England guidance states: “You must not do any work which might harm nesting birds or destroy their nests. You’ll usually find nesting birds during the main nesting and breeding season from 1 March to 31 August.”

There is also legislation protecting hedgerows, which are described by the Woodland Trust as “the most widespread semi-natural habitat in the UK” that support “a large diversity of flora and fauna.” Many hedgerows are protected under the Hedgerows Regulations 1997, based on their age, length, location or importance. The regulations make it illegal to remove protected hedgerows without permission from the local planning authority. However, not all hedgerows are protected, and legal obligations on planning authorities are either complex or insufficient.

There is clearly strong opinion on this matter, and a mark of that is the fact that the petition calls for netting to become a criminal offence. There is no doubt that pressure has been put on developers, with some of them reviewing their practices; Bovis Homes and Bellway, for example, intend to change their policies to stop the use of netting at any of their sites. The industry’s union, the Home Builders Federation, says: “As we build the homes the country needs, the industry is committed to supporting and enhancing biodiversity, proactively protecting wildlife and providing an overall increase in the number of trees.”

Is that enough to strike a balance between the need of people to have homes to live in and the need to protect our wildlife and green spaces?

There is no doubt that this petition has raised plenty of interest in the national press and media, as well as strong feelings. Perhaps it is time to make the law stronger, in an effort to protect our indigenous species and the environment.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on opening the debate so well and referring to my main bugbear: HS2.

When I looked at the petition, of the 355,631 signatures, 1,162 came from my constituency, and 5,454 people from an area covering Aylesbury, Buckingham, Wycombe and Beaconsfield signed the petition to express their concern about netting and protecting birds. That is a sizeable number of people and reflects the great concern that is shown for our environment in Buckinghamshire.

When I was young, I spent a lot of time on my uncle’s farm in south Wales. One of the great joys was to go around the farm and pick up the egg shells after the birds had hatched—I used to save them. There were always a multitude of different birds nesting around the farm site. Over the years, living in the countryside, I have noticed a reduction in bird life, not least among small hedgerow birds and birds that were very common in my youth. There used to be an abundance of sparrows, but in my back garden I do not see as many sparrows as I used to see 40 or 50 years ago. The RSPB says that, over the last 50 years we have lost over 40 million birds in the UK; that is a great loss that cannot be replaced.

As the hon. Member for Hartlepool said, it is an offence to destroy an active nest but there are no laws to prevent the installation of nets. The Government need
to look at that and regulate for it, because it is not necessary to leave this to the market. We need to have a positive intervention that will make some difference.

The RSPB spokesperson said:

“We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans. This is an issue we are talking to the Government about as they look at what needs to happen over the next 25 years to stop our wildlife from continuing to vanish at an alarming rate.”

As I said in my intervention, the trouble is that the Government are just as big an offender as any housing developer; they need to take that on board. The route chosen for HS2 passes through irreplaceable natural habitats and unspoiled ecosystems. Constructing a railway line with a land-take equivalent to a four-lane motorway will have a devastating effect on the natural environment in these areas. Over 130 wildlife sites on the first stage alone will be directly affected, including 10 sites of special scientific interest, an area of outstanding natural beauty and 50 ancient woodlands. That is in my backyard.

HS2 will cause an unacceptable level of damage to European, national and county-important species. A number of European protected species are present within the proposed HS2 route corridor, including the otter, the great crested newt and several species of bats. In addition, nationally protected species such as freshwater crayfish, stag beetle, smooth newt, common frog, slowworm, common lizard, European water vole, Eurasian badger, rare butterflies and breeding birds are known to be present in the impact zone.

The HS2 Action Alliance believes that insufficient regard has been paid to the impact of HS2 on biodiversity. Specific concerns about the risks facing wildlife include where the HS2 route is likely to cause direct loss or damage to the wildlife site through the land-take. This leads to the severance of habitats, causing fragmentation; reduction in the size of habitat areas; direct impacts on vegetation and on sedentary animal populations, for example in woodland and ponds; and/or the creation of barriers that affect the behaviour of species on a site, such as foraging.

The further environmental impact on ancient woodlands—areas that have been covered by woods for over 400 years—is alarming. Their biodiversity value cannot be recreated by replacement planting; nor can the habitats for birds be replaced, because birds return to the same site, and their behaviour will not always coincide with the marvellous plantation that has been created by the developer in another area, in another place. HS2 is systematically destroying a large corridor of the countryside through the centre of Buckinghamshire, and elsewhere, to make way for a railway that is literally costing the earth.

As the hon. Gentleman said, HS2 says that while the work is being carried out, it is using an ecologist to monitor events; that includes the netting being used to prevent birds from using their regular nesting sites, which is monitored daily. I decided to test the water by putting in a written question asking who the ecologists monitoring the sites are, how often they visit—how many times a day—and how many birds or how much other wildlife they have found dead or dying, or have released. Without digging into the detail, it is easy to state that the work is being done under the guidance of ecologists, when what is happening on the ground could be completely different.

I look to the Minister to encourage the Department for Transport to give me not one of its brush-off answers to the question, but a detailed one, so that we can be reassured that where the Government are in charge, they are keeping up with their responsibilities.

Jenny Chapman: I cannot remember whether it is the RSPB or Natural England that says the nets need to be checked three times a day by people who know what they are doing. I do not believe that that is happening. Was the right hon. Lady able to glean any more information about that when she did her research?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The hon. Lady will know that I often have a great deal of difficulty getting any information about HS2 out of the powers that be, but I continue to press because I do not believe we should give up. I have only been at it 10 years, trying to scrutinise the project. I hope I have another 10 years to go.

HS2 was clear in its statement about the bird netting: “The netting was installed under the direction of a suitably experienced ecologist and is monitored daily”, but I want further and better particulars, as they say. I am not entirely convinced that those nets will be monitored on a daily basis. Perhaps I will be called cynical, but I want to check. It is important, particularly in the light of the number of people showing great concern about what is a relatively new development, in terms of trying to get rid of some of our wildlife and bird species.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is making an excellent point. In my constituency I have seen where the habitat of ground-nesting birds—lapwings in particular—has been destroyed by herbicides being put down on sites that developers hope to develop. Does she agree that we need not just stronger legislation but stronger penalties for such actions that deliberately harm our wildlife, including actions leading to the destruction of raptors? I see such actions happening across my constituency, and there is little repercussion.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point, and I shall let it stand, but I should certainly be interested to see where the route lies and where the path takes us. There is no doubt about it: 20 years ago, after I became the MP for Chesham and Amersham, one of the great joys in the Chiltern hills was the reintroduction of the red kite. One of the great pleasures—if the hon. Lady would like to come out and visit the Chiltern area of outstanding natural beauty—is to see the red kites flying. They really are a source of great joy. It is a pity that we cannot do the same with some of our smaller nesting birds, which, sadly, we are losing.

I think I have made my point about HS2 and the Minister has heard it, but I must say that it begs the question why, if parts of the countryside have to be removed to make way for so-called progress, tree and hedge removals cannot be completed outside the nesting season. After all, it has taken 10 years and we do not even have the go-ahead for HS2, but we are already damaging the environment—irreparably, in my view—with the enabling works, even though we do not know whether the project will go ahead.

We are engaged in a major battle for the environment against global warming. Today we are discussing another battle—the battle for our birds in the United Kingdom. If we do not pay attention to the smallest creatures of our wildlife, we shall end up with a sorry, barren world, in which the next generations will be forced to live.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I think this is the first time that you have chaired a debate that I have taken part in, Ms McDonagh, so it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today.

It is good to see so many hon. Members here to discuss this important environmental issue. We have already heard some excellent speeches on the consequences of netting and the action required. I commend the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), who set the scene well.

In a short speech, I will concentrate mainly on my constituent, Maggie Moran, who started the petition that is the reason we are all here this afternoon. Maggie and her family are in Parliament today. She started her petition in the early hours of the morning after a long shift at Hull Royal Infirmary, where she works. At first it was shared among friends; it went on to gain more than 300,000 signatures, national media coverage and a response from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which I understand has written to developers reminding them of their legal obligations.

Maggie was kind enough to write to me before the debate. I know that she has also spoken to the media and received a lot of media coverage, and has explained why this issue is so important to her. In her note to me, she talks powerfully of her upbringing and how her family instilled in her a deep love and respect for nature. She speaks fondly of holidays where she and her father calculated the age of hedgerows. As she reminds us, our hedgerows are ancient, beautiful, rich ecosystems. They are homes, breeding grounds, safe corridors and hibernation spots for birds, bats, dormice, reptiles, insects, hedgehogs and others. They play a major part in preventing soil loss and reducing flooding. I represent a constituency in east Yorkshire. The Humber estuary is prone to flooding and 95% of the city of Hull is below sea level, so flooding is an important issue for me and my constituents. Also, hedgerows help to reduce road noise, and they produce oxygen, which of course helps with the climate challenge. Hedgerows are not obstacles to be removed, but life support systems to be protected. As has been discussed in more depth today, netting puts those fragile ecosystems at risk. It can entrap birds, dormice, bats and hedgehogs, separating them from their nests and food, injuring them and even putting their lives at risk.

We must look seriously at ending the practice of netting, but we must also think beyond that. Last year in the UK, numbers of bats, hedgehogs, birds and insects continued to plummet. The UN report last week spoke powerfully of how nature’s decline will presage our own. Awareness is growing that to support society, we must change the rules to give nature room to thrive. The Government must look again at how the developments we need—houses, schools and hospitals—can be achieved without destroying nature. As Maggie said, we must look at prioritising brownfield land, which the Campaign to Protect Rural England has said can be used for more than 1 million homes on 18,000 sites. When greenfield is the only option, we should include original habitats, including hedgerows and trees, in the designs.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech; I hope her constituent appreciates what she is saying on her behalf. As parliamentary species champion for the swift, I am keen to ensure that in urban development we put swift bricks into houses, which provide those birds with a habitat.

That is a really easy step and councils such as, I think, Exeter have made it compulsory for new developments. Does she agree that that is an excellent way to provide a home for swifts?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend, who is a great champion of nature and the environment, makes an important point. If that practice could be spread far and wide, it would be an excellent measure.

I will conclude by saying that it was nice to meet Maggie’s children Nell and John today; they are seeing at first hand what campaigning can achieve. Maggie told me that she put together the petition and brought her children to Parliament today because she hopes they will witness the lesson that, if we speak out, we can create real change for the future. To use her words: “I want them to see that...if they believe in a cause, and if they have conviction and are willing to speak out and work hard, then anything can be achieved.”

I am profoundly thankful to Maggie for raising this issue with us. I hope that this debate will prove her right and that action will be forthcoming to deal with netting of hedgerows.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on obtaining this debate in response to the public e-petition, which has rightly engendered a lot of support and interest up and down the country.

The petition comes virtually at the same time as the publication of the United Nations report that shows the extinction rates accelerating and “nature’s dangerous decline”. That report, from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, raises some interesting points. It ascribes some of the loss of those natural species and habitats to “changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasion of alien species”.

I instigated a debate here on the latter subject not long ago, regarding the importing of plants, trees and so forth from overseas.

It seems to me that the RSPB strikes a chord when it states:

“We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans.”

That is why I believe that, with the exception of some eminent hon. Members sitting around this Chamber, we have woken up very late to all this. There must be a trade-off between economic growth and the need to provide houses for people, which no one debates, and the requirement to ensure that the built environment is sustainable for the natural environment. We cannot have one without the other. Where would the world be without birdsong? A very sad place. Where would the world be without swallows? I have not spotted a swallow in my part of the world, Devon, at all this year.
Doing nothing is simply not an option. For too long we have put up with some of the behaviour of the volume house builders. It is perhaps unfair to paint them all with the same brush. It is an easy thing to castigate, but somebody has to build those houses. I lament that there are not more local house builders. I think this Government can do a lot more, as they have said they will, in encouraging smaller local house builders—those same house builders who were squeezed out by the last recession—to play their role, because they are from the communities in which they will be building, so they are likely to build in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

Time and time again we have seen, up and down the country, the major volume house builders riding roughshod over local planning officers—because there are not enough of them and many of them are not qualified enough—changing the terms on which they develop and, too often, squeezing out the natural environment. I am not against profit; I am a Conservative, and I believe in profit and that a rising tide lifts all ships. However, I am a believer in responsible capitalism, and it is about time that this Government, or any Government of any hue, were a little tougher with some of those volume house builders. Perhaps then we, as Members of Parliament, would not have to put up with so many constituents complaining to us about shoddy finishes and the like.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The point the right hon. Gentleman is making about the volume house builders and their complete disregard, it seems to me, for some of the planning regulations in place has been reflected in my local authority area. In Humberston, Persimmon Homes has cut down about 200 perfectly healthy trees to build its properties without having the proper permissions in place. It will now have to replant all those trees, but they should not have been removed in the first place. Does he agree that there should be much more enforceable action on these big build companies to ensure that they adhere to the rules that are laid down in the first place?

Sir Hugo Swire: I do and I do not agree; I agree that that sort of behaviour is wholly unacceptable, but I do not agree that they should replace like for like, if it is the case that they have done this where there were tree preservation orders or the like. If they have cut down a number of trees, they should be obliged to plant many, many times the amount of trees they have cut down, to encourage a change in the pattern of their behaviour.

I am afraid that it often comes down to the lack of local planning officers or their inability to challenge those large companies. Local councils are terrified of being taken to appeal, because then they have to fund it, so it becomes a vicious circle and a win-win for the volume house builders, as we have seen—although I say again to the volume house builders, or their representatives, watching this debate, that I do not view them all in the same light.

That is one of the points on which I wish to conclude. The Government have been quite clear, but they need to be a little bit clearer what they are going to do about this. Why do we not have a register run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and named and shaming the worst offenders, so we can see on a regular basis which house builders and developers are behaving responsibly and which are not? There are also such things as shareholder action groups, and they and others can vote at annual general meetings and so forth and can bring the matter to the board’s attention. Naming and shaming, in this instance, is an extraordinarily good way to proceed.

I believe it is time to stand up to that sort of abuse. We are in the slight conundrum—or I am—of castigating some of these volume house builders while at the same time recognising that we need to build more houses, and quickly, if we are to avert what is becoming a national crisis in getting younger people on to the housing ladder. However, with the current scrutiny of developers, I would have thought it would make eminent good sense from the point of view of their own public relations. Indeed, if I were advising them—I am not available to advise them, incidentally—on public relations, I would say, “This is precisely the sort of headline that we don’t want to read about ourselves.”

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In my constituency, there are a couple of developments on greenfield sites. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) report that Bellway has now decided not to use netting, because until a few weeks ago it had netted an area in my constituency where it was about to develop, which, as he said, caused great uproar and consternation among people who were opposed to the development in the first place.

Sir Hugo Swire: That is very good and shows that some of these companies are more concerned about the environment than gross profit—or, indeed, net profit. They should concentrate on having no netting, not net profit, in some instances.

To conclude, a list of offenders would be a good thing. However, I do not think that we should use a hammer to crack a nut. Parliamentarians should insist only on proportionate, enforceable legislation. As I said, I am not convinced that it is either desirable or practical to ban netting of hedgerows, bushes and trees throughout the year—because I am not really an environmentalist in this sense, I do not know whether it is. However, as a start, we should ban netting during the breeding season, which the Minister will hopefully say something about when she concludes the debate. If we can achieve that this afternoon, it seems to me that we will not have wasted our time.

5.10 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), along with the Petitions Committee, for securing this important debate.

Many of us will have sung the hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful”. Some will have sung it rather well, and some, like me, less well, but we will all remember the line “each little bird that sings”.

The dawn chorus provided by our feathered friends is one of life’s most uplifting and natural sounds. Let us not lose it; it is diminished as it is. We need to cherish it.

Birds have played an important part in our lives for centuries, from the canary that protected the miners to the pigeon that carried messages in war and the budgerigar...
that perhaps provided companionship to a person on their own. The wild birds in our hedgerows are equally important for our wellbeing, the pollination of our plants and tourism, bringing twitchers, if I may call them that, to areas such as the Isle of Islay, where there is a host of wildlife—it is well worth visiting—and Loch Doon, in my constituency, where ospreys nest.

It is important that humans and wildlife co-exist in harmony for a balanced ecosystem. It is therefore disappointing to learn of the practice of netting trees, bushes and hedgerows prior to construction work commencing on various sites, with the clear aim of preventing birds from nesting, alleviating the risk of delay to those developments. However, there is some good news, as has been mentioned: I understand that Bovis Homes and Bellway will not use netting at any of their sites. That is a welcome step, although I fully appreciate that there has to be a balance among supporting businesses, providing homes and protecting wildlife. Let us hope that other house builders, major and smaller—I am sure many smaller house builders have very good practices—follow the good practice of Bellway and Bovis.

The Woodland Trust believes that netting, while not necessarily unlawful—the relevant offence would be to take or destroy an active nest—shows a complete and selfish disregard for birds and other wildlife. The RSPB is campaigning to introduce a law to protect nest sites, to enable migrating birds to return and rear their young in a safe environment. I understand that the intention is to do so in a manner that does not prevent the development of land but encourages considerate and careful development. Potential options include the relocating or replacing of hedgerows at an early stage in development, prior to nesting season commencing, or putting up nesting boxes as a compensatory measure.

Birds and wildlife are part of our ecosystem and our planet, and we should embrace them, not evict them. Protection is available for bats nesting in buildings, with strict rules about disturbing their chosen habitat. Why should birds not be given the same or similar consideration, with a balanced approach between the needs of nature and of the developer? I ask the Minister to consider enhancing the protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which already protects nesting places where birds normally have their nests? They migrate and return to find netting there to prevent them from nesting. I opened up a small housing new build in Hartlepool only last Friday, and incorporated into those houses and bungalows were bat boxes and bird boxes. Such cheap and good practice should always be the way ahead.

Mike Hill: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the points raised in the second petition, about returning birds, and that equal measures are needed for netting places where birds normally have their nests? They migrate and return to find netting there to prevent them from nesting. I opened up a small housing new build in Hartlepool only last Friday, and incorporated into those houses and bungalows were bat boxes and bird boxes. Such cheap and good practice should always be the way ahead.

Bill Grant: I totally agree. We cannot meet our housing need, which I think we all agree we have to secure for our fellow citizens, at the expense of evicting wildlife or birds. We have to embrace them. Innovative ways have been suggested for how we can host them and make them part of our lives and part of our communities, because they are part of the planet and we need to share it. On that kindly note, I shall end my speech.

5.15 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on securing the debate. His observation on the plastic-waste debris from this practice flies in the face of pollution from plastic not ruining our planet. It is hard to believe that this is actually a practice at this moment.

I also liked what the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said on HS2. The reckless ruination of ancient woodlands and the subsequent impact on wildlife is not acceptable and should not go ahead. I particularly praise the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and her constituents for raising the petition. I very much liked the points of the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on volume house-builders and championing local builders. We need to hear an awful lot more of that throughout the whole UK.

As we all know, there are far more pleasures in life than the music of wild birdsong. The dawn chorus has just been mentioned, and blackbirds and robins in our gardens are an absolute pleasure for us all to watch. In fact, I have a one-eyed blackbird in my back garden who goes round in the same direction all the time. I do not know if that is because of where I put the food out, but that is the way that he manages to go. Birds are very much part of the sights and sounds of our communities. They are everywhere. They are the embodiment of the natural world, which is why it is abhorrent to see them taken for granted, to the extent that they can be disregarded like pests or vermin.

In my hometown of Denny and Stoneywood, I have witnessed probably some of the worst practices of developers. Some giant sequoias—giant redwoods—planted 50 or 60 years ago by local children were cut down accidentally by a developer, and I never felt such a gut-wrenching feeling in all my life. Netting prevents birds from breeding in their natural environment, and it has become so prevalent that their numbers could be at risk. If someone in the future reads of the practice of netting to aid housing development, they would be forgiven for thinking that this country and the planet was going through a pronounced period of planet stability and had an overabundance of wildlife. One would think the planet was managing very well, when we all know that that is not the case—perhaps apart from the developers of this mad scheme.

It appears to any casual observer that developers and conservationists have laid down together in amity on this, but I emphasise that that is not the case. Like others, I was taken aback when made aware of this practice. I was absolutely astonished and astounded to others, I was taken aback when made aware of this...
Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I congratulate the Morans for initiating the debate and for putting the issue on the agenda in the way that they have; I assume these are the Morans in the Gallery. We have heard about the massive decline in bird numbers in this country—14 million in the last 50 years, according to the RSPB. Habitat loss is a big part of that, and netting is increasingly a part of habitat loss. It may not be the biggest part, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is without doubt the cruelest demonstration of, at best, our disregard for the natural world, and at worst the ongoing war against nature that we have seen in this country, which has massively reduced our biodiversity and which needs to be addressed, if necessary through legislation?

John Mc Nally: I totally agree. This practice sends all the wrong messages about what we are trying to do; it gives everyone the wrong message. We should be sending clear messages that we are environmentalists and are trying to protect our planet. This practice tells people the opposite, and the fact that those employing the practice think that they can get away with it is, again, unacceptable. Others have mentioned what we need to do about that.

As we have heard, there are two open parliamentary petitions concerned with bird nesting. The one that we are discussing is specifically about making the netting of hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting a criminal offence, and I believe that it had attracted more than 350,000 signatures by 2 May. As has been mentioned, articles in The Guardian and reports on the BBC have shown where nets are being used across the UK and have helped to highlight the deep concerns of the public and prominent environmentalists. Important organisations, including the Woodland Trust and the RSPB, have led the objections to the practice. Environmentalists Sir David Attenborough and Chris Packham have spoken out against it, warning of the impact of the widespread use of nets. Only a fool would ignore the warnings from those great people.

In Scotland, section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it an offence to obstruct or prevent any bird from using its nest, and section 5 makes it an offence to use a net to kill or take a wild bird. However, provided that the net is put on before nest building commences, no offence is committed under that legislation, which is strange. Under the habitats regulations, it is an offence deliberately or recklessly to obstruct access to a breeding site or resting place of a European protected species or otherwise to deny the animal use of the breeding site or resting place. Similarly, it is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place used by the species protected under schedule 5 to that Act.

Scotland, like other countries, is a nation of animal lovers. We take the welfare of our pets, wild creatures and livestock very seriously. Developers in Scotland are aware that they have a responsibility to preserve important environmental assets such as landscapes and wildlife habitats. They should act responsibly and care for our natural habitats. Given that there is a significant body of European Union legislation on animal welfare, the Scottish Government, through the SNP, will work to ensure that the Government here ensure that the protections that offers are maintained and that there is no lapse in standards in this arena as the UK leaves the EU.

Calls have been made for those wishing to keep birds away from certain sites to work in harmony with nature, not against it. Why not work around the nesting season and employ someone who knows about wildlife to advise on how people should go about their business while causing the least harm? I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham about how often checks must be done. If nets cannot be avoided, regular checks should be made to ensure that no bird or wild animal has been caught in them.

I have to say that, even with some safeguards in place, my feeling is that this practice is in no way acceptable. If we treasure our precious wildlife at all, netting simply has to stop. If developers will not exercise proper care and diligence, suitable penalties should be applied to them.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on introducing the debate in the way he did and on setting out the need for urgent action to stop the cruel and inhumane practice of netting of bird nesting sites. Every bird matters, and because our wildlife does not have a political voice of its own, it is important that we in this place provide that voice. Today, the Minister will have heard a comprehensive and cross-party argument—on both sides of the House—as to why this cruel practice needs to be stopped and why measures need to be taken to discourage not only developers but, as a number of colleagues have said, the public sector and public organisations from using this practice.

Humans are threatening our planet’s wildlife. They are causing huge and potentially irreversible climate change, and we all need to do something to stop it. A few weeks ago, the House agreed to a Labour motion declaring a climate emergency. The emergency is not just about carbon. Although it is about carbon, it is also about species loss, habitat decline and the pollution of our seas and waterways and our atmosphere. All of that needs to be taken together. When it comes to habitat decline, netting around bird nesting sites is a contributor to the wider issue of habitat loss—a point made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith).

From the bees that pollinate our crops, to the forests that hold back flood waters, the report published last week by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services reveals how humans are ravaging the very ecosystems that support our society.

It is not a coincidence that the same quote has been given by both a Labour and a Conservative Member of Parliament:

“"We cannot keep trying to squeeze nature into smaller and smaller spaces or demanding it fits in with our plans.”

We need cross-party consensus that we will not accept any form of economic behaviour without a plan as to how it will protect our environment.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I could not agree more. My hon. Friend is making a very good case for the need for cross-party consensus on what is a long-term problem. If we are to deal with nets on
nesting sites, does he agree that we should also do something about roosting sites, which are not mentioned in the current legislation? In Whorleston, in my constituency, thousands of starlings have been doing murmurations for the last two years, but some developers, where they are building new houses, want to knock down the hedges that have become the roosting sites of those starlings. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should also cover the issue of roosting sites if we are taking the time to change the legislation?

**Luke Pollard:** I agree that this is a complex area that requires detailed consultation not only with developers, but with public-sector land managers, such as Network Rail, HS2 and local councils. We also need to look at the way our wildlife uses not only our built environment but our natural environment in different ways. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) made a clear distinction between building on brownfield and building on greenfield sites, but there can be bird nesting sites in beautiful trees on both brownfield and greenfield sites, so we need to take steps to deal with what is sometimes a false distinction in our legislation between brown and green, but also to deal with the different ways in which different species use our built environments. I am grateful for the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has just made.

The report from the UN said that we need “transformative change” to stop the trend of habitat loss, and we do. That is why it is really important that the Minister take the concerns expressed in this debate not only back to her Department—I hope that she will speak about the built environment in a moment—but to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because we need a cross-Government approach to address many of these concerns.

**Kerry McCarthy:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. It is important that we look at how we farm our land. The vast majority of land in this country is used for growing food, and there is a real issue because as it becomes more industrialised in scale, there are fewer hedgerows, bigger fields and less attention to biodiversity. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should support measures to encourage farmers to farm more sustainably, with more regard for the biodiversity on the land?

**Luke Pollard:** I agree entirely. A few weeks ago, I visited a farm just outside Plymouth run by a fantastic farmer called Johnny Haimes, who demonstrated how agriculture could be more sustainable and still be profitable. That is the type of best practice that we need to encourage farmers to farm more sustainably, with more regard for the biodiversity on the land.

A number of hon. Members have made the point that it is not just developers that we need to look at. As the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said, we need to look at how the public sector should lead by example on this matter. The majority of that can be done by local councils, but the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), in his speech, also covered the issue of roosting sites if we are taking the time to change the legislation.

**Luke Pollard:** That consultation was run by DEFRA, and it asked whether we should have a net gain of biodiversity if there is to be economic development. The Government consultation received 670 responses and closed in February. In theory, the results are to be published alongside the environment Bill later this year. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us whether that is still the plan, because we know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs publishes plenty of consultations, but takes very little concrete action. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what she intends to do in respect of that.

**Luke Pollard:** We are seeing species decline in all parts of our wildlife in every part of the United Kingdom. The breeding farmland bird index is falling. It has declined by more than half since 1970. The breeding woodland bird index for the UK declined by 25% between 1970 and 2017. We cannot keep squeezing nature into smaller spaces and we must put the environment at the heart of Government policy. The best way to do that is for the Government to lead by example in the projects that they run and the leadership that they can provide for the environment sector.

**Liz Twist:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In the past fortnight, many of us attended an RSPB drop-in called “Let nature sing”. I am sure that we all supported the goal of getting their nature CD into the charts. I am told it got to number 18 in the charts. There is a bigger issue. He is talking about planning issues and squeezing nature. Many residents are concerned that when we develop greenfield sites in particular, but other sites as well, it feels as if the environment is a long way down the priorities list. We look at off-site mitigation and other things, but what we want to do is preserve the site. This has been a huge issue in my constituency recently.

**Luke Pollard:** Singles like that would make a proud addition to my collection of Britney and Kylie songs on iTunes, so we need to promote it. We also need to ensure that every type of economic activity that we have as a
country becomes greener. If we are to meet our Paris climate change obligations, we need to remove 80% of the carbon from our economy. We will not be able to do that simply by recycling some more plastic bottles. We need fundamental economic change. The UN report on species loss outlined the transformative change that is required, and made it clear that when it comes to the loss of habitat in respect of the trees and hedgerows that are being lost through bird netting we need to take quicker action.

**Dame Cheryl Gillan:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he ignored me when I tried to ask him to give way earlier, when he was talking about net gain. Regarding the aim of net gain, I hope that we all will observe that in some instances it is impossible. If we destroy ancient woodland, we cannot replace it: it is irreplaceable. I look at net gain with a great deal of scepticism, as I hope others do.

**Luke Pollard:** The right hon. Lady is right to be cautious, because with net gain the devil is in the detail. It cannot simply be used as a stamp, to pretend that it makes the activity greener when it does not. A number of us share that suspicion about the consultation, so I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to that.

Finally, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I thank Maggie Moran, Nell and John for their work in setting up the petition, as well as Simon Leadbeater, who initiated the second petition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool mentioned. We all need to do our bit to put pressure on developers, to ensure that the cruel and inhumane practice of netting precious bird-nesting sites comes to an end. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the Government will be doing that with a cross-Government approach in the weeks and months ahead.

5.33 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):** It is also my first time serving with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on securing the debate. I am sure it was a bit of a lottery and that probably many people applied for it.

As we have heard, more than 355,000 signatures are on the petition. That shows the strength of feeling about the misuse of anti-bird netting in our country, so I am pleased to see the passion shown in this debate. I am grateful for the contributions made by hon. Members from across the House and representing most parts of the country. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who has unfortunately had to leave, highlighted the importance of developers using netting when it is not necessary. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) reminded us that netting should only be used outside the nesting and breeding season. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) made such a powerful point about the great interest shown in this issue by the good citizens of the Buckinghamshire area in particular.

I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Government’s position and the action we are taking, and to respond to the important points made in the debate. This Government share the public’s concern about the misuse of anti-bird netting. That is why we lost no time in taking action. On 8 April, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government set out the Government’s views. In an open letter to major developers, circulated by the Home Builders Federation to all its members, he made it clear that using anti-bird netting to prevent birds from nesting is not acceptable. He called on house builders to act, reminding them of the Natural England guidelines that specify what surveys of the potentially developed land are to be carried out, and how we can prevent or mitigate any danger to wildlife.

It is worth taking a moment to remember why this is so important. Native bird species have been in shocking decline since the 1960s, with 40 million birds vanishing from our skies. Some 56% of bird species in the UK are in decline. Nets stop birds getting through to make their nests. Gaps in the netting can leave birds trapped or young birds unfed.

I am aware that this is a complex issue. Nesting birds present in trees and hedges can cause real delays to construction. Some of the nets are placed with good intentions. In Norfolk recently, a district council draped nets over cliffs so that a sandscaping project could proceed. However, the nets covered more than the spring breeding ground of sand martins than was necessary. In this case, with advice from the RSPB, the upper section of the netting was removed, allowing nesting where there was no risk to the birds during the work.

**Kerry McCarthy:** A lot of people were very distressed when they saw the pictures of the sand martins that had flown thousands of miles back from their winter migration and could not get back to their nests. I accept that there probably needed to be some work done on coastal erosion, or whatever the reason for the netting was, but there must be an issue of timing with such things. It was done at exactly the wrong time, when those birds were returning to their homes.

**Mrs Wheeler:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point. That council has learnt its lesson. It should have brought the RSPB in much earlier, but it did rectify the situation. I also watched that footage and it was very distressing.

Netting is permissible if the intention is to protect birds, but I suspect that many of those who signed the petition are concerned that these rules are often carefully misunderstood by some developers. Netting should never be used to hinder the natural cycle of nest building and the nurturing and feeding of young birds. Nets should protect birds not profits. The law on protecting birds and preventing the disturbance of nests is clear. Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006, prosecutions can be brought if someone causes unnecessary suffering to a bird by an act or failure to act, especially when the person concerned knew or reasonably ought to have known that their action or inaction would cause harm. Breaches can lead to fines or imprisonment. I am happy to acknowledge that some developers get the message. As we have heard, Bellway and Bovis Homes have declared that they are both changing their policies to stop the use of bird netting, and Barratt Homes does not net hedges or trees on any of its 400 or so sites.
across England, Scotland and Wales. Their actions show that it is possible not to use bird netting when firms plan ahead, so that construction does not clash with the nest-making and chick-rearing season.

As we have just marked Hedgehog Awareness Week, I am particularly aware that there must be wider recognition that we must do all we can to safeguard and enhance our biodiversity for the future. Today, local authorities already have a duty, under our national planning policy framework, to pursue net gains for biodiversity. The Government intend to give local authorities more powers to insist on the protection and enhancement of biodiversity. Our 25-year environment plan is a symbol of that deep commitment and a reflection of our shared desire to leave our environment in a better place than we found it. To answer the question of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) specifically, our forthcoming Environment Bill will make biodiversity net gain mandatory for development.


Mrs Wheeler: There’s a scoop for you.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The Minister is doing well in picking up on all the points. If it will be made mandatory for all developers, why do the Government not make it mandatory right now for HS2 to stop its netting?

Mrs Wheeler: Regretfully, we need legislation to do that. When the Bill comes in, that will be the legislative vehicle for it, because whether it is birds or hedgehogs, we are determined that our wildlife does not just survive, but thrives.

Kerry McCarthy: I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which have been conducting pre-legislative scrutiny on the bits of the Environment Bill that have been published. Although I welcome the idea of biodiversity net gain, there is real concern about how it would be enforced. It is not something that we can replace like for like; it would take an awfully long time to replace what was destroyed, and in some cases, it could not be replaced. I urge the Minister to talk to environmentalists, ecologists and other specialists about whether it is feasible to make the proposed swap.

Mrs Wheeler: Again, the hon. Lady makes a perfectly reasonable point. I am sure the people in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have heard it and will pick up on it.

DEFRA’s recent consultation proposed introducing a requirement for new developments to deliver a 10% net gain for biodiversity, onsite or off. It also includes an alternative tariff that developers could pay to offset the costs of providing environmental improvements. I look forward to seeing those proposals considered and debated in due course. I hope the hon. Lady will be involved in that.

Liz Twist: Does the Minister accept that many residents faced with the loss of hedges or the offsite mitigation of environmental benefits are unhappy? They want their local environment to be preserved for birds and other wildlife and for local enjoyment, rather than some money to be paid to address the issue in another place.

Mrs Wheeler: In every planning application, the matter will be dealt with at the local level, so local wishes will be part of the decision-making process.

Helen Goodman: I am sorry to say this to the Minister, but if the legal framework is inadequate, the local planning authority cannot take such matters into account, because it does not have the vires—the powers—to do it. That is why we are looking for legal change in the area.

Mrs Wheeler: Indeed, and as I like to remind hon. Members, that will be debated as part of the Environment Bill when it is introduced. I am sure that all hon. Members present would like to take part in that debate when it happens.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Can the Minister tell hon. Members present when we can expect the environment Bill?

Mrs Wheeler: In due course.

There is no question of making a choice between homes and nature. We can and must have both, because for us, as well as for animals, the benefits are clear. Our natural environment can have a profound impact on our physical and mental health. We need access to our natural environment; it is part of what makes life on earth worth while.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with all of us. Our planning system and our planning authorities play an essential role in the mix; mechanisms allow them to say what can and cannot take place on a construction site, as well as when. Planning conditions, including surveys and other pre-construction stages, can be enforced by local authorities. If developers do not comply, a development may become unlawful.

The Government are working tirelessly to set up further protections. Through our revised national planning policy framework, and with help from stakeholders such as the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust, we are supporting planning tools that protect our natural environment. We have increased the protections for irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees; any loss or harm from development must be “wholly exceptional”. We have also clarified the importance of local wildlife sites in plan making by introducing the need for plan makers to take a proactive approach to rising temperatures and, wherever possible, to help to improve environmental conditions, including water and air quality.

As announced in the housing White Paper in 2017, we have provided £6.9 million over three years to Natural England, which will allow it to roll out a proportionate risk-based approach to protected species licensing nationally—principally, for great crested newts. That will provide greater protection at the same time as speeding up the process and reducing costs. We have also provided £210,000 to the Woodland Trust to support the first update of the ancient woodland inventory maps since the 1980s, to make protection more effective.

Developers must play their part in the wider wildlife agenda. They must provide access to new green space and develop green infrastructure, such as swift bricks,
bat bricks and hedgehog highways, because our wildlife and its habitats are interconnected. We would like developers to design in as many nature-friendly stipulations as are reasonable. The Housing Minister saw that done impressively on a visit to Kidbrooke Village last week, where natural corridors and landscapes are a core part of the masterplan behind the regeneration. Let me be clear that gains in biodiversity must be genuine, not just a token gesture by a developer ticking a box by drilling holes for a theoretical hedgehog highway.

We must all play our part. Existing householders, neighbourhood planning bodies and parish and town councils can help to ensure that wildlife-friendly features are built into every garden in every neighbourhood. People can also make their voices heard—for example, the recent public outcry about the netting spread over a hedgerow in Berkshire led to it being removed by the council. Today’s petition is another example of democracy in action and people making their voices heard. Although we reject today’s call for yet more detailed regulation on bird netting—I have described the protections that already exist—I have the deepest respect for the aims of the petitioners, in particular Mrs Moran and her family.

Even as we pursue our campaign to build the homes this country so badly needs, we must do all we can to champion our natural environment. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet”.

5.47 pm

Mike Hill: Equally, in the words of Joni Mitchell:

“They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.”

I hope we do not get to that.

Next to Hartlepool is RSPB Saltholme, which is a lovely nature reserve in an industrial landscape. Recently, a site of special scientific interest was extended around Hartlepool’s beautiful coast. Because netting had been used in my town for development, I was grateful that the Petitions Committee allowed me to introduce the debate.

I must thank the petitioner, Maggie Moran, who is present, and the second petitioner, Mr Leadbeater. I also thank the right hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), the hon. Member for ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and all hon. Members who intervened so wonderfully. I thank Petitions Committee staff for, as ever, getting involved in researching the subject and for all the interactive work they did on Facebook.

It has been a helpful and useful debate. I hope we make some progress to tighten up on a practice that has clearly been escalating lately, given the demands of the housing sector and the requirements to protect our wildlife. On the second petition, the netting of existing buildings to prevent migrant birds returning to their nests needs to be looked at as well. As has been pointed out in relation to HS2, the Government have a responsibility for the work that the contractors who work for them do on such big projects.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 244233 relating to protecting nesting sites for birds.

5.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 May 2019

[IAN PAISLEY in the Chair]

One Public Estate Programme

9.30 am

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered One Public Estate.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to bring forward this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Paisley.

I have secured this debate because I believe it is important to review programmes and policies and, as far as I can see, there has been very little scrutiny of the One Public Estate programme since its launch some six years ago in 2013. It was launched by the coalition Government, largely in response to their priority of reducing the deficit. Although I acknowledge that ambition, my great fear is that we are witnessing a wholesale asset stripping of the public estate with very little public or central Government scrutiny.

However, I appreciate that the programme’s aim was just as much to seek to join up central Government, local government and other partners to make better use of public assets and their land. The idea was that by public partners sharing space, running costs could be reduced and surplus assets sold to generate money or released for other purposes to create new jobs or homes. In fact, the programme had three core aims: to create efficiencies, generating capital receipts and reducing costs; to create local economic growth, creating new jobs and homes; and to deliver more integrated, customer-focused services, providing citizens with better access to Government.

My interest in securing the debate was motivated by my own time as a councillor on Warwickshire County Council, and by a local project involving new offices for Warwick District Council, my local authority, which I believe could have made use of the One Public Estate programme. It is also motivated by my wider interest, which many will know of, in housing issues and particularly social housing. I will outline the aims of the programme when it was first launched, provide my own assessment of its success and perhaps unpick some of its failures, particularly in relation to housing.

Launching the policy in 2014, Francis Maude, who was a Minister in the Cabinet Office in the years 2010 to 2015, outlined the impetus for the programme thus:

“In the absence of a comprehensive, coordinated strategy, central departments and their arms-length bodies all did their own thing.”

He continued:

“They did it without talking to each other and without thinking about their local partners.

Because no one was looking at the bigger picture, departments would take on expensive new leases when government freeholds remained under-used—or where local authority accommodation was available just down the road.”

I will come back to that point and illustrate it with a local example. Later in my speech I will also return to what Mr Maude was saying in 2014, as I think his words were particularly significant. They are certainly eerily apposite to the case of Warwick District Council, my local authority, and its proposed self-described new headquarters building in the centre of Leamington.

There was merit in Mr Maude’s approach, and I applaud his thinking at the time. For example, the notion of providing services in one place as opposed to several could better serve the public by providing easier access to local government and other public services. The obvious example would be a jobcentre sharing space with a council’s welfare and housing team.

In its initial trialling in 2013, the programme focused on 12 councils. It has since expanded rapidly so that just over 300 councils now participate, representing 95% of all English local authorities. The One Public Estate programme also works with 13 Government Departments and hundreds of health and blue light organisations. It works by providing a combination of central Government grant funding directly to partnerships, which have to bid for it, and expertise that local authorities and other public bodies do not always possess.

The purpose of the funding is to cover up-front costs associated with getting a project under way and to unlock those potential assets, for example through remediation works on land that could be used for housing. One Public Estate has also formed a partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to jointly administer the Government’s land release programme, which is designed to release land for 160,000 homes on Government land and a further 160,000 on local government land by 2020. That was formulated back in 2017.

There have been some successes through the programme. In my assessment, the aims of One Public Estate are, in the main, laudable. As someone who spent part of my career bringing change to an organisation, I wholeheartedly support the programme’s aim to rationalise the use of public assets to reduce the cost to the taxpayer, and to provide Government services in a more joined-up and accessible way. In fact, shortly after the programme’s national launch, I proposed a “one Warwickshire estate” programme as a county councillor. I could see that the county and district councils in my community could make much better use of the land and buildings they owned to serve each other’s needs.

Across the country, there have clearly been some successes, albeit limited ones. The most impressive is that to date the programme has created 5,700 jobs, and the latest phase is expected to create a further 14,000 new jobs. That is a tangible benefit for people up and down the country. To date, it is estimated that running costs associated with partner projects have been reduced by £24 million, and the new phase is expected to save taxpayers £37 million in running costs. However, I point out that, while any saving to the taxpayer is positive, £24 million over five years is relatively small beer compared with the overall cost of Government.

There are individual cases that will bring big benefits to their local communities. Looking through the various materials available on the programme, I see the development over the years of public sector hubs, if done in the right way, as a positive step forward. The West Suffolk partnership is currently developing such a hub, which will have space
for a school, leisure facilities including a swimming pool and health centre, children's centre, public library, jobcentre and citizen's advice bureau, as well as space for Suffolk police, West Suffolk Council and Suffolk County Council. That will surely benefit how the local community interacts with the public sector, and the project is expected to reduce running costs by £4 million to boot.

Another example is in Cornwall, where the police, fire and ambulance services have co-located in a new joint headquarters in Hayle, saving £500,000 a year on running costs and releasing two sites for redevelopment. The new facility has enabled the emergency services to reach many more people within the target response time. Since the success of that first tri-light co-location, Cornwall partners have progressed to a number of further blue light property co-locations and piloted emergency services collaboration, with tri-service offices being rolled out across the county.

I mentioned that Warwick District Council, in my area, has been seeking to build itself a new office. I do not believe that is necessary, because there is ample vacant or void space in the county council offices, just two miles up the road. I will come back to that a little bit later.

There have also been failures of the programme. Perhaps the greatest failing of all has been the wholesale disposal of public land, ignoring the greatest crisis of all—the need to deliver much-needed public housing. That is my greatest concern because, to paraphrase, “They don’t make land any more,” and, together with its people, public land is a community’s greatest asset.

We are in the midst of a serious housing crisis: 277,000 people are homeless and 1,157,000 households are currently on the housing waiting list. There is a clear and urgent need to house people who are at the sharp end of this crisis, but we also hear from older constituents who are renting privately and unable to afford their rent—a problem that will only increase. It is estimated that by 2040 up to one third of 60-year-olds will be renting privately. We also know that many younger people are trapped in the private rented sector.

One of the major barriers to providing housing is land. Sky-high land prices are preventing local authorities from gaining access to land to build on, and those prices are incentivising cash-strapped councils to sell off the land they own rather than build on it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He talks about social housing, and there are five major cartels in this country that the Government should tackle. They get involved in what I call land banking, or 40% there, but 100% of such land. I fear—with good reason, it seems—that the One Public Estate programme was designed more to incentivise the public sector to sell its precious land as part of a national asset-stripping programme than to use the opportunity so afforded to design in a more efficient delivery of public services or facilitate the building of social rented housing, which would be of most social benefit to most communities.

A relatively small number of homes have been delivered by the OPE so far: just 303, which is a failure in itself. Overall, the land released will enable the building of a further 2,550 homes, with an estimated 10,000 more homes over the next five years. It worries me that I cannot find the data on how many of those homes will be social rented, or even affordable—I suspect most are not—or how much of the land has been released to local authorities to build council housing; I suspect most has not. It would be helpful if the Minister provided the data today.

I do know, however, that the Government’s estate strategy revealed that around £2 billion has already been generated from selling more than 1,000 buildings in the last four years, with £164 million in capital receipts from land and property sales raised as part of the OPE. How much of that land could have been suitable for delivering the social rented council housing we desperately need? In truth, any such need, or means of facility to meet that need, has been fundamentally undermined by the prevailing attitude that public sector assets and land are best released to the private sector. I think it is fair to say that that was the view of what is now seen as a surprisingly neoliberal coalition Government. In the speech that I referred to earlier, Francis Maude went on to say that “we want to release property back onto the market”, and that the Government “identified assets which could be released between now and 2020, generating £5 billion for the taxpayer.”

To be fair, it appears that this Government’s priorities have changed from those of the coalition Government. The Prime Minister has claimed that austerity is over, although the public are yet to see any evidence of that. She has also claimed that she wishes to solve the housing crisis, naming it the Government’s No. 1 domestic priority. Indeed, the borrowing cap has been reformed so that councils can begin building council housing at scale again, but a cap should never have been imposed in the first instance. I therefore urge the Minister to look again at how the One Public Estate programme operates, in terms of releasing public land, and to shift its priorities so that public land that is suitable for the development of social rented council housing is prioritised for that purpose, instead of being flogged off to the highest bidder.

The defence estate optimisation programme provides a very good example of the potential of OPE, but also its failings. The Ministry of Defence currently accounts for 2% of the UK’s land mass. The Government recognise that many of those sites could be better used, particularly for housing, and the Ministry of Defence has announced plans to release around 90 of its most expensive sites before 2040, potentially releasing land for 55,000 homes. That relies on linking up the Ministry with the relevant
local authorities and providing them with the up-front cost and expertise needed to make the most of the release of those sites. The OPE is well placed to fulfil that role; indeed, it is already involved in discussions relating to 12 of the sites.

However, if we dig slightly deeper, we see that the opportunity for mass social rented housing programmes on that land is being totally missed. For example, St George’s barracks in Rutland is due to close in 2021, and the master plan that has been developed provides for 2,200 homes as part of a new garden village. The OPE programme was awarded £175,000 in December 2017 for project management, consultation, surveys and master planning of the barracks site—so far, so good. However, when we delve into the master plan, we see that only 30% of the homes will be affordable. Worse still, of those, 50% will be affordable rent, which we all know is not that affordable; 35% will be starter homes or other affordable home ownership products; and 15% will be rent to buy. It appears that none will be social-rented housing—a prime example of a fantastic opportunity missed for OPE and genuinely affordable housing.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the Minister this morning before the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman believe it is important that there is a purpose behind the sale of any land, such as saving money when Departments come together? Equally important, as he outlined, is the need to ensure that, whatever land becomes available, there is a social housing requirement to give those who do not have the same assets the opportunity to buy or rent houses. In Northern Ireland, we had a suggestion—not a rule—that developers should set aside 10% of land for social housing. Does he feel that the Government should look at something more objective for the mainland, with land set aside in law for social housing? Does he think that might be a way of retaining land for social housing? People cannot get housing if we do not give them the opportunity to do so.

**Ian Paisley** (in the Chair): Order. If Members wish to make speeches, will they please make an application to do so? The Chair of the debate will happily accommodate them.

**Matt Western**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—I think it was an intervention—and he makes a valid point. There is a huge need to legislate for this, as I have identified, with 1.2 million people in homelessness. We have a massive social crisis because of the land banking that is going on across the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said. We saw that yesteryear with commercial land, when the big supermarkets just took up options, and now we see it with housing developers and home builders, who have a huge number of options across the country, in Northern Ireland and here on the mainland. They control the prices, the roll-out and the build of housing in this country, and they allow to be built what is viable for them, in view of the profitability that they want to achieve.

In Amsterdam, all housing projects have to deliver 80% social housing. Whether it is 10% or 40%, or whatever the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we have to choose, politically, the right figure. I want the figure to be 100%, which is the way the Dutch authorities are looking to go in Amsterdam. That is what we need, because we have such a crisis. The Shelter report from January on the need for social housing identified that we need to build 3 million social rented properties in the next 20 years—155,000 every year for the next 20 years. That is why we should use all this land to realise its greatest value, which has to be in its social value, not simply in the financial receipt.

To summarise, let me be clear: I support the overall aims of the One Public Estate programme. It has been important in trying to achieve a change in the mindset of those in the various public sector authorities and our Ministries to try to deliver better outcomes. Its simple approach of seeking to establish a partnership model across the sector was, and remains, right. The simple idea of mapping the public estate and understanding, through audit, what is out there and what we have that local authorities and others can use; the establishment of a strong governance mechanism, with representation across the public sector, which is vital in driving delivery; and the engagement of public sector partners as early as possible, to ensure that a project meets the needs of local communities, are all creditable and right. When delivered effectively, it can produce savings to the taxpayer and, most importantly, improve local services, but I am absolutely not convinced that that is happening as widely or as openly as was originally hoped.

I can only draw on my own experience in Warwickshire and with my local authority, Warwick District Council, where there has been no real appetite to exhaust the options of sharing assets. We still have in Warwickshire a police headquarters and a fire headquarters, and both are on prime land. There is considerable opportunity for a master plan to improve the delivery of services while enabling the best use of assets for the public purse. The Suffolk example that I gave earlier is a positive example of what can be achieved.

I think, however, that there are examples across the country of asset stripping, and of the wholesale industrial sell-off of land. My fear is that there is not, through the Public Accounts Committee or through this place generally, proper scrutiny of what is going on, even though billions of pounds of public assets are in play. I would urge the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy to be more closely involved.

In my own investigations, I realised that one particular company was involved with my local council, Warwick District Council. Called PSP—Public Sector Plc—it is, I discovered, involved with 22 different authorities across the UK. I understand that it has not followed a procurement process, yet it is advising and involved in the disposal of these assets. Surely CIPFA and others should be looking at that. I believe that the Government Property Agency should be looking at it, and so should the Public Accounts Committee.

We should focus on the ambition, which is the utilisation of the assets for the maximum possible benefit in our communities, and on how we realise true social value. In practice, that means a shift in the programme from delivering as much money as possible—the highest receipt—through the sale of assets, to releasing land for local authorities to deliver the best services, the best
joined-up practice and high-quality social rented council housing so that we can finally get to grips with our housing crisis.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of other hon. Members and that of the Minister, but I urge us all to think about our most pressing need, which is to deliver low-rent social housing. Only public land can deliver that.

9.52 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on such a superb and powerful opening to the debate. In particular, he made the case for social housing and the importance of 100% social housing and affordable housing on the sites released by Government. If he will excuse me, I am going to take a slightly different journey and talk about the opportunities for release of public land in relation to creating jobs, which is an essential part of creating the fairer society that we want to see.

This speech will be an unashamed plug for Plymouth. As many people who have heard me speak in this place will know, I am very proud to be a Janner, very proud to be from Plymouth, and the experience that Plymouth has had, the journey that it has been on, can tell us a lot about One Public Estate and how it fits with other Government programmes and, in particular, the Government hubs programme, which I think has a good opportunity to create jobs in my part of the world.

I was intending to spend a bit of time talking about how fabulous the far south-west is, until I saw the new Minister in his place. I believe that, as the hon. Member for Torbay, he may have an inkling of just how fantastic a part of the world the far south-west and, in particular, south Devon is. I know that he knows Plymouth very well.

I want the Government to start realising at a faster pace their ambition to move jobs out of central London and into the regions, in particular those regions that have missed out on many of the large Government relocations in the past. The far south-west, and Devon and Cornwall in particular, is one of those areas with an appetite for greater investment. There is a willing and skilled workforce who can support our public sector objectives, and there is an opportunity, using the lower land costs, to realise benefits for the taxpayer in terms of not only output, but economic activity and cost to the taxpayer.

We know that, on average, good-quality, affordable business premises in Plymouth and the far south-west are about a third cheaper than similar properties in many parts of the south-east. Considerable savings can be made when we look at costs in central London in particular. I think that the principles behind the One Public Estate strategy support moving more jobs into the regions. Programmes that channel funding and support through councils to deliver ambitious property-based projects tend to work best when there is opportunity, land and a real willingness and drive to do that. The opportunity to work more with local councils should be a thread running through this debate, because from the initial small cohort of councils when the One Public Estate strategy was first formed, we now have, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington said, nearly all English local authorities involved, and entrepreneurial, innovative local councils are driving forward very interesting and beneficial property development.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he is now going down a route that is particularly advantageous for other parts of the United Kingdom, in terms of not just developing social housing but the economic benefits that can be derived by Government looking at disposing of surplus land—land that will not be required over the next 10 or 20 years—but that that requires intensive consultation with local communities to arrive at the conclusion that he and I seem to draw?

Luke Pollard: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The important points are what Government land is disposed of, how it is disposed of and where the benefits of that disposal flow. We have seen in Plymouth, a city with a very large military pedigree and current military role, that many of our former armed forces bases have been sold off, but the benefits of the sale have been taken to the Exchequer in London and not delivered to the communities that previously gained employment and investment and a sense of identity from those military bases. I think that there is an opportunity to use much of the surplus land, which is owned by a cohort of public authorities—ranging from the Ministry of Defence and all the weird and wonderful MOD agencies, through to Plymouth City Council and different parts of the Government estate—and to bring services together. If the Government are to realise their ambition of moving from 800 to 200 Government offices by 2023, the idea of creating a Government hub in the far south-west, in Plymouth, where we have already shown, through the Land Registry and previously the Child Support Agency, that civil service and public service jobs can thrive, is a good opportunity.

We lost out on the Marine Management Organisation towards the end of 2010, and many of us in the far south-west still talk about how we lost out on the wealth tax agency in 1979. We were suprised by the election of a Tory Government who perhaps were not too keen on creating a wealth tax agency—who would have known?—but there is now a real opportunity, and if you will forgive me, Mr Paisley, I will talk for a few moments about Plymouth’s One Public Estate journey.

The unlocking of South Yard in Devonport has been an incredible success. That surplus land owned by the Ministry of Defence was not being used for Royal Navy purposes. It has been repurposed as Oceansgate and, through the One Public Estate programme, is creating new marine jobs. Plymouth has a huge opportunity in marine science and marine engineering, and Oceansgate is helping to unlock that. It is taking far too long to overcome the logistical barriers between the detail of what the MOD might want and what businesses might want, but that challenge can be overcome.

OPE 3, 4 and 5—the funding streams—have helped us to develop our integrated health and wellbeing hubs. There is huge potential here. We have spoken about
some of the big, aggregated services, but GP surgeries, mental health support, sexual health testing and social care can all come together at a much smaller, micro level. Indeed, I would encourage the Minister to have a word with his new colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), about the super-hub project. Plymouth has applied for funding from the Department of Health and Social Care for that project, which would bring sexual health testing, an eight-to-12-chair dental surgery—enabling dental students from Plymouth’s superb dental school to learn and help to treat people in some of the poorest communities in the city, right next to the city centre—directly employed GP surgeries, mental health support and health and wellbeing services all into one building, at Colin Campbell Court, which the Minister may know well. There is a huge opportunity there. Part of the One Public Estate strategy has to be to mobilise and motivate other Departments to make decisions that might be slightly off their usual funding streams if there is an opportunity from doing so.

The other aspect that I would like to mention relates to the better defence estate. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington spoke passionately about some of its successes and some of its failures, and we have had a similar journey in Plymouth. There is the success of relocating the Royal Marines from Royal Marines Turnchapel. Releasing that land and creating what is now a world-class centre for autonomous marine engineering has been a huge success. The new base at Royal Marines Tamar, at the very north of Devonport, has been an incredible success for the Royal Marines. It gives quick and easy access to the Tamar and, through that, to Plymouth Sound and to the training facilities at HMS Raleigh and a superb new state-of-the-art facility for our Royal Marines there.

However, there have also been failures from One Public Estate, and that has largely also been about the Royal Marines, in relation to the closure of Stonehouse barracks. There has been an attempt to rationalise that defence estate by closing the spiritual home of the Royal Marines—the only purpose-built barracks for the Royal Marines that are still in use. Those barracks are not fit for purpose. There is no hot running water in many of the accommodation blocks; the showers and the heating do not work. We should not accept that for our Royal Marines when they are at home. Many of them would accept that when on deployment, but not at home.

Now that we have seen the Government U-turn on their commitment to build a superbase in Plymouth, which would have brought the Royal Marines to our city, I would be grateful if the Minister encouraged his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to look at how the programme for relocating the 3 Commando Brigade from Stonehouse barracks to a new purpose-built facility for the Royal Marines that are still in use. Those barracks are not fit for purpose. There is no hot running water in many of the accommodation blocks; the showers and the heating do not work. We should not accept that for our Royal Marines when they are at home. Many of them would accept that when on deployment, but not at home.

There is an opportunity to create a new Government hub in Plymouth, bringing together civil service and public service jobs from the centre of London to create a new, superb facility in Plymouth. As the Minister will know, Plymouth is a centre that can create jobs not only within Plymouth and the PL postcode boundary, but for the wider Plymouth travel-to-work area—or perhaps the greater Torbay area, depending on one’s perspective—to help us create wider economic benefits for our region. There are many failings of the One Public Estate strategy.

Jim Shannon: In Northern Ireland a very different approach has been taken. The Government policy is to turn former Army barracks into intergenerational places, where the community and the economy can come together, where businesses can build and where councils can be involved. That is all happening on Army bases. In other words, the benefactors are the communities of all sides. That was an opportunity we have used in Northern Ireland. Perhaps they could do something similar where the hon. Gentleman lives?

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I feel that the hon. Gentleman has a speech waiting to get out of him today. I am tempted to put him on the notice paper, whether he wants to or not.

Luke Pollard: I take what the hon. Gentleman has said. In Plymouth, although we are better known for the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, we do have an Army base at the Royal Citadel. One of my frequent concerns about the defence disposal programme is that the MOD maps have a red line drawn around the site, and that is the land chosen to be disposed of. We need to take a much more holistic approach and ask about the needs of the wider community beyond that red line and what benefits can be accrued for it, especially when it comes to disposing of Ministry of Defence bases, with which the local community’s identity and employment opportunities are often so intricately involved. I encourage the Minister to speak to his MOD colleagues about that.

Although One Public Estate has had many failures, it has also had some successes. I encourage the Minister to keep tweaking those elements that are not quite right and also to unblock the decision-making process that is delaying the relocation of civil service and public service jobs from central London to the regions. My sense is that there are decisions waiting to be made and announced that could have a profound and positive economic effect on the regions, especially in the far south-west. I encourage the Minister in his new job to give the cage a bit of a rattle, to see if we can accelerate some of those decisions, because there are jobs to be created, value to be restored and money to be saved for the taxpayer. I also encourage the Minister to look at that wider opportunity of creating more affordable homes and decent jobs.

10.3 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for opening the debate in the way that he did, looking at not only his local perspective, but the national perspective of One Public Estate. It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I concur with him about the opportunities the regions provide in departmental change and bringing those vital jobs into the region. I look at York and its connectivity: with the upgrade of the east coast main line, it will be just over an hour and a half out of
I want to focus on Bootham Park Hospital in York, which opened in 1777 and closed in 2015—the doors were shut only three days after the inspection. That caused much harm in our city. It was a mental health hospital, but I concur that the site itself may not be suitable for modern-day provision of mental health services. However, I would like the Minister to respond on what happened to that site.

The local authority was working with the local trust, the clinical commissioning group, the sustainability and transformation partnership and other public services, which came on board to formulate what opportunity that site could provide for our city. Analysis was undertaken, particularly looking at the opportunity around healthcare, but also wider services. For instance, the police and crime commissioner identified that this would be an ideal location to place a women’s unit in our city.

I have to say that the progress of One Public Estate in realising the site’s potential was slow, but the local authority was even slower in identifying, with NHS Property Services, that it wanted to utilise the site for the benefit of the city centre. Much of the site cannot be developed, because under its trust status it has to remain as parkland, but land at the back of the site can be developed. Needless to say, the beautiful building is listed, but in need of much repair.

The site for the clinical commissioning group costs £100,000 a year just to maintain and keep open. Those charges are to the detriment of the strapped-for-cash clinical commissioning group, which is one of the worst-funded in the country, so it is eager to move the process forward. However, the NHS Property Services timescales for the disposal of the site did not meet the One Public Estate process, so my plea to the Minister is to ensure that there is synergy in the timescales that are being executed in how sites are developed and the opportunity that realises for the city.

From my meetings with the former Health Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), it seems that NHS Property Services determined that it wanted to dispose of that site at the earliest opportunity. However, it would not wait for One Public Estate’s fully worked-up proposals. Therefore, it disposed of the site to a private developer, which is going to build—guess what?—more luxury apartments in the heart of our city. The developer is also looking to build a hotel and high-value older people’s accommodation, as opposed to addressing urgent need.

The site is uniquely placed next to our acute hospital, which is on a cramped campus without room for expansion. The hospital is bursting at the seams and has been challenged by winter crises. The only opportunity for that hospital to expand is the Bootham Park Hospital site. Indeed, it had ambitions to do so to provide better access to the site and to provide other vital services, such as physiotherapy. Furthermore, it proposed to extend hospital parking facilities and other services on to the site.

Vitally, the site was an opportunity to provide housing for key workers, which has been identified as a real need. We have more than 500 vacancies for NHS staff in the city, and that crisis is worsening. York’s expensive property prices are one reason for that, so the opportunity to provide key worker housing on a site in close proximity to the acute hospital was necessary, but the loss of another opportunity means that the acute hospital’s
agency bill will be higher. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington said, the financing with respect to the disposal of such sites does not come back to the city; it goes to Departments, so there is no benefit to York. We will not see that money again, even though we have a real crisis around health services.

I have looked at the evidence base behind the One Public Estate bid. The York Teaching Hospital, the Humber, Coast and Vale sustainability and transformation partnership, Vale of York CCG, York Medical Group and the city council were looking at the opportunity to utilise the site for public benefit, but that has been denied and overridden, and it has been sold to a private developer. That will certainly not enhance our city, because it will put more stresses on the public services in our city, not reduce them.

The opportunity that has been passed up was for the development of 147 homes, which York needed; 52 key worker houses; a physio suite, which I mentioned; medical training; a research centre; a 70-bed care home; 60 assisted living and supported living apartments; a children’s nursery, which our hospital does not have and which would have been vital; public parking for use at the acute hospital; and a new public park for York in the heart of our city, where there is one of the highest levels of premature mortality in the city and where people should have the opportunity of some open green space.

Going back 100 years in York’s history to the time of Joseph Rowntree and others, there was real recognition of how to build a humane city and move it forward, but those opportunities are being passed up due to the greed of private developers that want to maximise their profit and cram the most expensive properties into the heart of the city. As I have explained, the people of York do not have the resources to purchase those properties, so they are being pushed further and further away from the city. Therefore, the social engineering that is taking place is to the detriment of local people across the city.

The city is becoming hollowed out, as private apartments are being built. Some people perhaps depend on utilising our public services at weekends, but we cannot afford the people to work in those public services. Therefore, the whole city is being put out of kilter and skewed with respect to needs. With the connectivity that I mentioned, it is clear that people now see York as being in the commuting zone of London and cities across the country, which puts more stress on our city.

My request to the Minister is that he look at the situation with regard to Bootham Park Hospital, where one Department is not talking to another and the local need is not being addressed. A massive public consultation exercise is happening about the Bootham Park Hospital site and on the York Central site, although we have not got to that point in the process with Imphal barracks. The Government say that they respond to and recognise the value of the voice of the community, so why is that voice being completely ignored through the disposal of such sites? I believe it needs to come forward.

In York, we have launched a “Public Land for Public Good” campaign. We need to ensure that there is a public good test in all planning decisions, so there is an enhancement of the way that land, which we know is incredibly precious, is utilised, as opposed to giving profit to developers. Frankly, the people of our city are angry about that, because they are losing out on the opportunity for vital jobs and services, and even a home. I ask the Minister to respond to those points, and I trust that he will take them back to his Department and that we will see real change.

10.16 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing the debate and making an excellent case, which stems from his vast experience in local government in his area and as a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I also thank my hon. Friends for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for their excellent contributions, which demonstrated the vast reach of the public estate strategy and its local effects.

On the face of it, the One Public Estate programme appears to be a positive, sensible strategy to reduce waste and get the most out of our public assets, as I expect the Minister will say. Its stated goal of unlocking land to increase house building is commendable, as estimates have put the number of new homes needed in England at between 240,000 and 340,000 per year, but worryingly, on recent estimates, the Government’s target of 300,000 homes annually is already under threat and could take 15 years to achieve. Let us not forget that over the last two years fewer new social rented homes have been built than at any time since the second world war.

To face that challenge, central Government must take a sustainable and transformational approach to resourcing local authorities to provide the homes we desperately need, but the Conservatives have comprehensively failed to do that. The strategy, which is effectively austerity by the back door, sells public land and property for quick cash under the illusion of helping to solve the housing crisis. It is not only disingenuous, but kicks the funding can down the road, rather than confronting the serious realities head on.

I say that the policy is disingenuous because the Government’s figures show that One Public Estate has released land for the development of just over 3,000 new homes, and the public land for housing programme has released land with capacity for fewer than 40,000 homes. That is some way short of the programme’s ambition to release surplus public sector land for at least 160,000 homes by 2020, just one year away.

The idea that this strategy and programmes such as One Public Estate are even scratching the surface of the housing crisis is total fantasy, yet the bigger question remains unanswered: why are public land and property being handed over to private developers in the first place and why are they being sold at a discounted price? Shockingly, analysis by the National Audit Office shows that of the 1,500 or so sites released by Government between April 2015 and March 2018, 12% were released for £1 or less. Let me get to the central point: such is the scale of the challenge, and the consistent failure of the market to tackle it, that we must look at empowering local authorities and housing associations to use public land to build the affordable housing this country desperately needs. Not only is that the best strategy for tackling the housing crisis, but it provides a way for the public to share in any rise in land value, as the Institute for Public
Policy Research and others have pointed out. The Opposition oppose the strategy of flogging off public assets for developers to provide insufficient housing.

The Government must be called out for missing their own targets. I ask the Minister, how many of these homes built on public land are affordable? When it comes to central Government land sales, remarkably, the Cabinet Office does not analyse data at the programme level to assess the use to which the land is subsequently put, but let me help the Minister out. Thanks to research by the New Economics Foundation we know that only 20% of new homes built on public land will be affordable. That is simply not good enough.

We know that one of the main reasons that this figure is so low is the fact that developers are able to exploit section 106 loopholes and ride roughshod over desperate councils, leaving the public ripped off. We must also ask why local authorities are signing up to programmes such as One Public Estate, because they know such programmes will reduce the land and property they use for essential services, which are assets that might not be needed today, but may well be needed tomorrow. Indeed, much of the land and property sold under One Public Estate and other programmes is needed, despite the rhetoric around reducing waste. As the National Audit Office report said, many sites identified for disposal are still being used by public bodies to provide services.

How have we got here? Ultimately, because for almost a decade our hard-working local authorities have been forced to implement the Tory austerity agenda. Under the Conservatives, local authorities have faced a reduction to core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means councils will have lost 60p of every £1 that the last Labour Government provided to spend on local services. With a £3.1 billion shortfall in funding, many councils are funding essential services or redundancies by the quick sale of their property portfolio for good. The scale of this is staggering.

Research by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism found that £2.8 billion-worth of local authority-owned assets were sold between 2014 and 2018. In 2016, the Government said that they expected local authorities to sell assets with a value of £11.7 billion by the end of this Parliament. That same year, the Government passed legislation to allow local authorities to invest the proceeds of assets sold by April 2019 in transforming frontline services. Just how low will this Government stoop? They have decided that the right way to fund social care, youth services, libraries, bin collections and road repairs is not by reversing their tax cuts for millionaires or clamping down on tax avoiders, but by forcing local authorities to sell their assets—assets owned by the public—while further inflating private developers’ profit margins.

If we needed yet another reason to show that this is a Government for the few and not for the many, here we are. For the public, this is a ticking time bomb until the day local authorities have sold assets they will one day need. The housing crisis remains and local authorities have run out of family silver to sell to raise funds. The Tories know exactly what they are doing: forcing councils to implement austerity, leaving them no choice but to sell public assets such as libraries, youth centres and playing fields—assets our most disadvantaged people rely on—to fund vital services.

One Public Estate is part of a strategy that has been rumbling on for many years in different forms. Local government now owns just 40% of the land it owned a few decades ago and the NHS has seen its estate reduce by 70%. As our population grows, as demand is loaded on to local authorities and as our housing crisis deepens, what will this Government say when they have run out of public assets to sell, and their great housing remedy has produced only a few thousand extra affordable homes? I suspect they will not say much at all.

One thing is blindingly clear: this scheme and others like it do little for families who are desperate to exercise their right to an affordable home or for those who rely on public services. They do very little for our councils, which deserve fair funding, not schemes to encourage asset stripping. Our message to the Government is clear: stop messing about, confront these big issues head on, own up and admit that this strategy is really austerity masquerading as partnership and a house building strategy.

The public deserve far better. They deserve a Government on their side, standing up for the public good, building homes, funding and improving their public services, and unashamedly putting the money in this country first. We will make those honest, bold and fair decisions to fund our councils and build the homes we need. We have that plan; it is fully costed, fully transparent and exactly what the next Labour Government will deliver.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call the Minister. You have lots of time to answer all these questions.

10.26 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. At the start of my response to a debate, I usually say that I will allow a couple of minutes at the end for the Member who secured it to speak, but I suspect I will be able to allow slightly more than that on this occasion.

This debate has been marked more by quality than by quantity of speakers. The speech made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), started so well. She made a point of saying that the scheme was a positive one, and that we share the goal of seeing the public sector work together. Few of us would think it was a good idea to spend money on bricks and mortar, rather than on delivering public services. Her speech went a bit awry after that, however.

Local councils have been doing a lot of these projects for some time, and we do not compel local councils to take part in them, as I will come on to say in a minute. The scheme that the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) has been particularly exercised about, which is being undertaken by his local district council, is not part of the One Public Estate programme. There is no compulsion to take part.

Some of the closing comments sit strangely with my memories of the period between 2008 and 2010, when I was the deputy leader of Coventry City Council and dealing with the Labour Government, which seemed equally keen on the idea that public land could be released. To be fair, the previous Labour council had released land to fund certain regeneration projects; we also saw that during preparations made by the then
Department for Communities and Local Government, which sought to take about 20% out of local government funding following 2010. Most of us were not surprised when the spending review that was due in 2009 was kicked back to after the general election; we can all conclude the reasons for that.

I move on to the other contributions to the debate, and I have to start with the speech made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). As always, he made a passionate pitch for my home town and birthplace of Plymouth. He is right to say that moving Government jobs out of London does not just have an economic impact; it is about a change of perception. A civil service that is almost entirely based in London and the south-east creates a perception about issues and about the rest of the country; it may not give the idea of one civil service for one United Kingdom.

Over many years, various organisations have operated successfully outside London and the south-east, including the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea. We can see the opportunity that Government hubs bring. For example, while some operations are already located in Cardiff, the Wales Office is looking at how it can be part of a hub opposite Cardiff station, to show that the Government are at the heart of Cardiff, not on an estate outside the city centre. That says a lot about our ambition as well; I expect it is an ambition that will be shared by Governments, whatever their colour, over the next 10 or 20 years. To be clear, such a Government will govern the whole Union, and not just run the whole nation from London.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to cite the appetite of a skilled workforce in south Devon; it stretches into not just the PL postcodes but even into the TQ postcodes. He is right that, bluntly, the region offers the Government opportunities to get more money into delivery of service than into paying the exorbitant costs of property in central London.

In addition—this is a point that is sometimes forgotten—when Government buildings are released in London, within a short period of time there are usually more jobs and higher-than-average salaries being paid on that same footprint. Therefore, the process does not do London’s economy down; in many ways, it provides the opportunity that London’s private economy needs to grow, in the same way as public money benefits the regions. That is one thing that sometimes gets lost in the debate. Although there is the idea that jobs are going out of London, the space that is released normally provides an opportunity to create jobs in London.

Regarding the release of Ministry of Defence land, the hon. Gentleman cited Turnchapel—I am certainly looking forward to visiting it at some point, to see the automation there—and other places, such as Royal William Yard. My gran was a Stonehouse kid. Thirty years ago, Stonehouse was a shadow of what it had once been; it was a very sad place. Royal William Yard was coming to the end of its time as a victualling yard that was no longer needed by the Royal Navy. The release of Royal William Yard for redevelopment has not just led to its regeneration, but, as he will know, spurred a regeneration of the area around it. Gone are the days when semi-derelict industrial buildings made up the city’s red light district. Now the area is a real beacon of hope, aspiration and investment.

I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s concern about what will happen with Stonehouse barracks and, of course, the iconic Citadel. I think he will agree that although those facilities are historic and iconic, we would not want to run a modern war-fighting operation from them. As he mentioned, what our troops will accept in times of combat or conflict is very different from what we should expect them to put up with in times of peace. We are working to deliver a solution that works not only for the military but, as is the case with Royal William Yard, for the community that surrounds a base. Clearly, that is something that my colleagues in the MOD will only be too interested to continue talking to him about.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), as always, made a passionate case for her city. She made the point that, with modern connections, York is now 90 minutes from London, so the argument that moving jobs out of London makes them remote is no longer valid.

Ultimately, it is for local councils to make local planning decisions. I am aware that the hon. Lady is not the biggest fan of her local council; having listened to a number of her speeches over the last couple of years, I think it is fair to say that. She can use that point to challenge her local council both here and locally, and ultimately it is for local voters to make their decisions based on what they think of their local council.

I heard what the hon. Lady said about the hospital site that she referred to. I am happy to look at the site further to see how we can ensure that Government Departments work together. The goal of One Public Estate is to treat the public estate as one public estate, and not for different Departments to reach conflicting outcomes. The site that she mentions is probably one for us to look at, perhaps after this debate and perhaps with my colleague the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden)—he is the Minister for implementation—who has direct responsibility for this policy area. If there are challenges, we can consider them. As the hon. Lady said, in this instance the sale has already been made and that is probably the end of that, but we can perhaps consider this issue for the future. She has been keen that Government Departments view themselves as part of a whole, not just as individual operations.

I come now to the main part of my speech. I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington for securing this debate on One Public Estate and giving hon. Members the opportunity to reflect on this vital programme. I particularly liked the fact that he gave the example of Devon and Cornwall, where we have the joint response hub. That project is about not just bringing different services together, but considering how they can work together with co-responders, and particularly looking at areas where the police and the fire service struggle. For example, the fire service struggles to recruit retained firefighters, which might have been easier 40 or 50 years ago but is now harder because of changes in employment patterns and in how people live their lives. That project considers how such services can work together and deliver a better outcome for all three emergency services, including ambulances, by uniting and working together.

As the hon. Gentleman touched on, that project combining police and the fire service saves £500,000 a year on running costs and it has released two sites for
redevelopment. However, it has also enabled the emergency services to reach more people within their target response times. The process is not just about delivering a financial output; it is also about delivering better public services.

As has been made clear, One Public Estate has successfully forged new partnerships across the public sector, showing that collaboration is the key to achieving success. The strapline for the latest Government estate strategy is “a public estate for public benefit”.

This programme demonstrates how property can be a catalyst for achieving a wide range of benefits, including housing, jobs and more integrated public services. As I mentioned a moment ago, I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s campaign against Warwick District Council’s plans to build new offices alongside a new multi-storey car park and apartments, and to redevelop its current Riverside House site for private housing. I also recall him raising the issue in a previous Westminster Hall debate, in January 2018; on that occasion, if I recall correctly, I sat in the Parliamentary Private Secretary’s spot. In that debate, he said that One Public Estate was “a genuine and sincere ambition to get authorities around the table to review all public assets and decide how they can best be used for the future delivery of services.”—[Official Report, 10 January 2018; Vol. 654, c. 109WH.]

The hon. Gentleman is right that One Public Estate has brought hundreds of public sector partners to the table. He is also right that partners review all public assets to identify opportunities to deliver additional new homes, jobs and efficiency savings, and that communities across the country are enjoying the benefits of this programme, which uses partnerships to yield greater results.

Currently, One Public Estate is supporting five projects in the Connecting Warwickshire One Public Estate Partnership. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, Riverside House was not put forward as part of the partnership’s proposals to One Public Estate. As I have touched on, One Public Estate is not a compulsory scheme for local councils. It is also important to note that the programme has never sought to override local or national statutory duties, governance or requirements. The programme is designed to have the flexibility to support proposals from partnerships within a broad set of programme objectives. One Public Estate’s ability to tailor solutions that work for all partners involved is central to its success.

One Public Estate is about helping partnerships to thrive, but it is also a partnership itself, between the Office of Government Property in the Cabinet Office and the Local Government Association. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, it began in 2013 as a pilot in 12 areas, testing a fairly novel idea for Government—working collectively on property. We set out to discover whether laying the groundwork for collaboration, and providing seed funding and practical advice for public sector partners, would unlock significant additional benefits for both local communities and the taxpayer. That has clearly been the case—each year the programme has grown, as organisations have seen what can be achieved, formed new partnerships and put forward ambitious proposals.

Central to the One Public Estate approach is its focus on partnership. As has been referred to, it is a partnership between central and local government, whereby the Office of Government Property and the LGA act together as neutral brokers among partners. Regional programme managers in the team also provide support and challenge. Those joining the programme must also form their own cross-public sector partnership, bringing together central and local government, alongside other national and local partners, including the NHS, the police, the fire service, local enterprise partnerships and others. Thirdly, projects must be delivered in partnership by multiple public sector partners.

The formula is already reaping rewards. Today, as the hon. Gentleman highlighted, One Public Estate collaborates with over 95% of English local authorities, 13 major Government Departments, and hundreds of wider public sector partners, working in 78 official partnerships. Together, these partnerships are delivering over 600 projects across England, ranging from co-locating services, so that they are under one roof, to releasing surplus land for housing and town centre regeneration.

These organisations have come together to achieve more than they could alone, and to make better use of the public estate for public benefit. So far, the programme has generated £163 million in capital receipts, saved taxpayers £24 million in running costs, created 5,745 new jobs and released land for 3,336 new homes.

However, that is just the beginning, especially when it comes to housing, which is the Government’s top domestic priority. The problem of insufficient housing in this country is not a recent one; it goes back decades and involves numerous contributing factors. We could debate the origins of the housing shortage for hours, with each one of us arguing about our own party’s record, but today I will speak about a few of the ways in which this Government have acted to address this crucial issue through One Public Estate.

With housing, One Public Estate helps to create a pipeline of land, de-risking projects and making them investment-ready. The projects may then secure finance from Government housing initiatives, such as the accelerated construction programme or the housing infrastructure fund, or from other sources.

One Public Estate also plays its part in promoting modern methods of construction to local authorities and across Government, and furthering knowledge of this emerging market. It has organised factory site visits, facilitated meetings between One Public Estate partners and offsite providers, partnered with the University of Liverpool to examine the barriers, and co-sponsored the offsite village at the Chartered Institute of Housing’s 2018 conference, to further public sector knowledge of this emerging market. The programme has also allocated funding to partnerships to take forward vital research on modern methods of construction in delivering housing targets.

In 2017, the programme partnered with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to deliver the £45 million local authority land release fund. This capital funding, coupled with One Public Estate’s regionally-based team providing practical support, is supporting councils to unlock land for an additional 7,000 homes.
I have seen the impact of this programme at first hand. In Torbay, three projects successfully gained nearly £4 million of funding from the land release fund and, between them, Victoria Square, Preston Down Road and Collaton St Mary will see hundreds of houses built, with some available for social rent. I want to be clear that the percentage of affordable housing on each site is a matter for the local council, with its plans and its planning consents. As with any other site, it will have to make its own local determination about what the challenges are, for example if a site is contaminated. This is about supporting local councils in delivering their ambitions, not the Government directing, top down.

Interestingly, One Public Estate is also supporting the development of plans for a new health hub in Paignton, providing a modern, purpose-built facility better able to meet the needs of the local community and releasing surplus land for enhanced public and community use. It is remarkably similar to the project cited by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and, hopefully, in the spirit of things, there can be learning between the two. The project in Paignton is looking to release a hub that is currently based in the much-loved Victorian hospital there. I have spoken in support of the project in Paignton and Collaton St Mary will see hundreds of houses built, with some available for social rent.

Luke Pollard: In a health hub, we bring together different strands that come from very different funding streams—not only from the Department of Health and Social Care, but from social care providers and from across the Government estate—and it might be worth looking at whether there is a better formula or model that can encourage that great collaboration. At the moment, it works in some places, where partners are working together already, but not in others, where there is a greater distance. I think there is a model of best practice that could be encouraged, and I ask the Minister to look at that.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive and instructive intervention. Because we have an integrated care organisation in Torbay, one of the advantages is that there is no difference between the local authority's budget and the NHS budget for social care, but I agree that there is a need to look at how we can bring partners together. A particular issue is where there are not just NHS and local authority services but GPs who are independent businesses—the great compromise from 1948—who then have to decide whether to move their service, potentially from a building of which they are a tenant or a leaseholder, rather than a freeholder.

Again, it is about being clear about the partnership approach and ensuring that the building is not seen as belonging to the council, in Torbay's case, or to the NHS, in Plymouth's, but is seen as one that all partners have a shared interest in, with the main goal being a better service for the public and for those who access the services, and providing a sustainable future.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington mentioned that One Public Estate has invested £665,000 to support the Connecting Warwickshire Partnership in his area to deliver five projects across health, regeneration and housing agendas: the co-location of services in Warwick town centre, the regeneration of Nuneaton town centre, a review of service provision from the site of the George Eliot Hospital, the transformation of Rugby town centre, and the development of a strategic housing pipeline to deliver affordable homes in north Warwickshire, utilising offsite modular construction. The Connecting Warwickshire Partnership expects the five projects to generate £35 million of capital receipts, cut running costs by £2 million, release land for about 1,000 homes and create 500 jobs.

Another example is in Brent, where One Public Estate is bringing together Brent Council, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust, the University of Westminster and social housing provider Network Homes to redevelop the Northwick Park area, creating jobs and delivering affordable homes, including, crucially, given the comments made about key workers in this debate, for NHS staff. One Public Estate revived an earlier proposal to develop the hospital site in isolation, and provided support and challenge that could result in 1,600 homes, which is about double the number planned by the partners operating alone.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington touched on the project in Rutland, where One Public Estate has awarded £175,000 and facilitated a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Defence and Rutland County Council to develop 300 hectares of surplus land at St George's barracks into a new garden village, including delivering up to 3,000 homes by 2032. It is right that we work in partnership with the local council.

Perhaps where I differ from the hon. Gentleman is that although I support the move to remove some of the caps—over the past few years we have started to see a slow revival in the building of council homes, compared with the period between 1997 and 2010—I do not necessarily think that it is for the Government to dictate that that construction should be the sort of mass-build estates we saw in the past. That is a choice for local councils, but certainly from my own experience in local government it is better when we have mixed communities rather than going back to the days when we built an estate on the edge of town as our pure provision of social housing.

Rachael Maskell: Is not the problem that local authorities may have their plans—it is absolutely right that they lead—but there is a collision course with the national determination of Departments? That is the piece that needs to be fixed.

Kevin Foster: My response to the hon. Lady's point is that I am certainly happy to look at the instance in her constituency of what I think was described as NHS Property Services operating to one timetable and One Public Estate operating to another. As I say though, One Public Estate is about co-operation rather than necessarily about the Government looking to direct that
a council must be part of it, as we touched on with the Warwick District Council project—that is not part of One Public Estate. Speaking as someone who believes quite a lot in local government, I would be loth for this to go down the path of direction from the centre.

Rachael Maskell: The other determinant, of course, is finances. Although Government Departments are trying to reap as much resource from the land as they possibly can, and that is why it is being handed over to developers, local authorities are really cash-strapped in how they can develop that land. Will the Minister also look at that collision course, when he goes back to the Department?

Kevin Foster: We have given a range of flexibility to local authorities to look at how they can develop, but ultimately they can act as a bank. My own local council is helping to bring forward a significant development, admittedly on private land but with clear guarantees and protections around the taxpayer interest in lending the money and actually making a profit. There are opportunities for local authorities to take forward developments; it is for each of them in each instance to decide whether they wish to use those opportunities. Regarding the idea that the programme is motivated purely by the need to make savings, I touch first on the fact that a plan was being formulated under the last Labour Government to make significant cuts to local government funding post-2010 and, secondly, on how the programme is helping to bolster local government finances by delivering the ability to work together with a view to saving money. Therefore, I do not necessarily recognise that the two are in conflict; in fact, the picture is quite the opposite.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I have given way twice to the hon. Lady, so I will do so again very briefly, but I will make this the last time.

Rachael Maskell: The point I was making is that Government Departments are taking that resource into their national funds—into their own budgets—as opposed to delivering benefit to local communities. There are, therefore, different interests at play when it comes to the resourcing of developments.

Kevin Foster: The Government are spending significant amounts via, for example, the housing infrastructure fund, to which eligible sites can bid, and the land release fund. I have touched on how the latter is releasing local authority land where authorities do not have the potential resource, or where it would be uneconomical for them to develop it on their own. In the Paignton example, the fund is paying to put a sewer into a site that would have been too expensive to bring forward, or where social housing would have been taken out to fund the infrastructure.

The idea that money disappears off into a central hole is not accurate, but we hope that One Public Estate encourages the parties to work together for the wider financial benefit of the public sector. In many instances, that will mean delivering a co-operative plan in the long-term interest of the Government Department concerned. Again, I or the Minister with responsibility for implementation, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere, will happily meet to discuss the target timeline of NHS Property Services versus the timeline of the One Public Estate bid, and see whether we can make some progress on that issue in future developments.

The programme’s original aim was to deliver 45 co-locations for the NHS, the police and the fire service by 2020. Today, the Government estate strategy hopes to quadruple that goal, setting bold new ambitions to facilitate 200 co-locations by 2020 and 250 by 2022. We can therefore see that One Public Estate is already delivering. Partnerships with projects under way expect to generate £615 million in capital receipts and £158 million in running cost savings, create 44,000 jobs, and release land for 25,000 homes by 2020. That is a tremendous amount of success in a relatively short time. In February, my colleague the Minister with responsibility for implementation announced the outcome of the programme’s seventh application round, a total of £15 million in funding. That is expected to support a further 10,000 new homes and 14,000 jobs over the next five years.

Since it began in 2013, One Public Estate has awarded £60 million to support projects and partnerships. The programme does not fully fund schemes; however, it facilitates laying the groundwork for future projects through feasibility studies, options appraisals and master planning. It can also help projects deliver at a faster pace by funding dedicated programme management. At the same time, and as we have touched on, we recognise our investment can bring about significant savings for some authorities, so we have introduced an element of repayable grants. In phase 7, which was the most recent, about £3.5 million of the £15 million funding available was awarded as repayable grants. Those will be repaid within a three-year period and, crucially, reinvested to enhance the future impact of the One Public Estate programme.

I again commend the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington on having secured a debate on the One Public Estate programme. As we have discussed, that programme has developed rapidly and is already having a significant impact on collaboration across the public sector. I particularly thank the Local Government Association for their excellent partnership with my Department in leading the programme, and pay tribute to the 95% of local authorities and many other partners that have chosen to take part in the programme. I am sure that Members will join me in wishing the partnerships well as they collaborate to deliver new homes, jobs, and improvements to public services in communities.

For many of us, the greatest reward in many communities will be seeing people achieve the desire that the Government regard as a key ambition for so many: owning their own home—having a place that they call home and that is theirs for as long as they wish it to be. That will remain a firm aspiration of this Government. Of course, we will support the development of social housing and deliver as much as we can, but none of us should ignore the fact that many people still hold the core aspiration of owning their own home. Too many people feel that aspiration slipping away from them, and we want to see it brought back to them, so they can enjoy it in the same way as their parents did.
10.53 am

Matt Western: I thank the Minister; I was getting a little nervous that he was not going to give me enough time to respond. At one stage, I thought I might have a few minutes more, but it is no matter. I thank Members for their contributions, which have been of supreme quality. This has been a healthy and valuable debate, and I give my sincere thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), as well as the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt). I also thank the Minister for his comments.

It is quite clear that huge regional opportunities are being presented here; that is perhaps not an oversight, but something that there has not been enough focus on. That is one of the great learnings from this debate. This is also about the pace of what is being delivered across the various projects and the priority being given to the local economy, entrepreneurial development and opportunity, as well as the key priority of housing, whether social or other. As everyone will have heard this morning, my sincere priority, which is shared by Opposition Members, is greater social housing.

How have we got here? As has been discussed, there has been a 60% cut in local authority budgets, which has put those authorities under huge pressure. My thoughts are with all those who have had to endure those cuts and work to the best of their ability to deliver the services that our communities depend on.

What we have seen, not just through One Public Estate but more generally, is a huge sell-off of our public assets, the greatest since the 1980s. As someone who used to work in a finance department, my great fear is about the lack of scrutiny in the process provided for by the Government. There seems to be no central co-ordination, and I believe that this country is being asset-stripped on a previously unseen scale. The public are vaguely aware of what is going on; yes, billions of pounds are being released, but I am not sure that the Public Accounts Committee has got involved in this issue. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee should also look at this topic to scrutinise what is happening, including the involvement of private sector developers and house builders, and who is actually benefiting from those huge sell-offs.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central talked about the test of public good, which is a terrific idea; it is something that should be learned from this debate. Likewise, we need to learn what is best practice for the delivery of health hubs around the country, as there seems to be a mixed approach in what goes on. The Minister is right about the one public estate, or lack of one, in the work being done in my local area. As I said earlier, “one Warwickshire estate” was accepted unanimously in Warwickshire, but somehow it has not been delivered with my local authority. There has been a lack of consultation with the public; and—going back to the test of public good—when we see more than 9,000 people in our local area signing a petition to say they are against a project, we have to ask, “In whose interest is that project?”

We have land, and it is needed; the question is how the use of that land and those assets is prioritised. The fact that the land is being sold to private developers in a very opaque way, lacking transparency, is of the greatest concern to local people and communities. As I said throughout my speech and as others repeated in their contributions, there is a need for social housing, and the Government are missing their own target. Only 6,500 social rented properties were built last year in this country, which is a travesty given the huge housing crisis that we face. As was reported this morning, this country has the second greatest inequality in the world; only the United States of America is more unequal. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central said in her speech, that inequality is evident in her constituency. There is no need for any more luxury apartments on the scale being proposed; we are denying ourselves social justice in our communities, and impacting on the economies of those areas.

We have heard that the Cabinet Office does not even monitor the delivery of these projects, or of the housing. We hear about hospitals existing on cramped sites. The Minister will be familiar with University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire and just how cramped and unfit for purpose its site is. We should be thinking much more in the round, as we should when it comes to the provision of libraries in our communities.

Thinking back to 2010 and the years before, the Labour Government had a series of regional development agencies across the country that provided great joined-up thinking about the delivery of infrastructure, healthcare, hospitals or whatever, and saw the big picture. My fear is that One Public Estate is much more on the micro level. Likewise, the previous Labour Government had regional spatial strategies for the delivery of housing, linked to those services and the infrastructure. Those strategies were done away with, which I think was a huge error of the incoming coalition Government in 2010. This is all about the bigger picture, but what are the priorities? I have repeatedly stressed the need for more social housing.

Finally, I once more thank everyone for their contributions; it has been a terrific debate about something incredibly important. Billions of pounds of assets have been disposed of. I thank the LGA and the House of Commons Library for their help and their contributions, and I thank you, Mr Paisley, for chairing.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Immigration Applications: Fee Structure

11 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the fee structure for immigration applications.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Rather than sitting in front of you as Chair, this time I am standing before you. I was first alerted to the subject of this debate after a constituent wrote to me about how a surplus charge was foisted on her when sponsoring her non-European economic area spouse’s application for settlement. Rather than simply charging an up-front fee of £388—that is the actual administration cost—the Home Office opted to slap on an additional arbitrary fee of £1,135. Effectively, the Government are making a 300% profit on my constituents’ “luxury” purchase of their right to live together in the place they call home.

I am grateful to my constituents for drawing the matter to my attention. Public politics is dominated by the superficial and bogus appeal of “Here today, gone tomorrow” braggarts, shysters and snake oil salesmen, but that is just part of what democracy is about. It is also about concerned and determined citizens taking an active interest in the workings of Government, taking their responsibilities seriously, working with their elected representatives and, when the Government are in their opinion wanting, holding them to account.

Significantly, a report by David Bolt, the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, attractively entitled, “An inspection of the policies and practices of the Home Office’s Borders, Immigration and Citizenship Systems relating to charging and fees June 2018-January 2019”, published on 4 April this year, outlined the costs of different immigration applications, including short-stay visit visas and settlement schemes, which is the matter I am concerned with today. The report calculates the surplus for each application type. The surplus is the difference between the 2018-19 fee and the actual estimated processing costs. When applying from outside the country for settlement through the family route, the surplus stands at £1,135, as my constituent noted. That is the surplus, but the actual cost is higher. Anybody would understandably be angry to discover that they were being effectively subjected to arbitrary and to my mind unjustified taxation. They are paying an excessive fee that is very much over the odds for something that should be their right.

The report by the chief inspector also directly addresses the point that short-stay visitor visas are being subsidised by other immigration applications. Despite being higher in price than originally planned—the Home Office had initially intended a 2% increase in 2018—the fee for a tourist visa was £37 below the unit cost. My constituent was paying three times more than the unit cost. My constituent initially intended a 2% increase in 2018—the fee for a visitor visa to London in 2017. If we compare that with the number of tourists visiting London, in fact—this will interest you, Mr Paisley, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—there were four times as many visits to London as there were to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. According to the Office for National Statistics and VisitBritain, almost 20 million tourists visited London in 2017. If we compare that with the 372,000 who visited Cardiff, hon. Members can see the point I am making. Who benefits from the subsidy, and who benefits disproportionately?

The Home Office has set itself the target of the immigration system becoming self-funding. Any below-cost offers would need to be balanced elsewhere within the system, either through fees that were higher than unit cost for other application types or through cost-saving efficiencies, or perhaps both. The principle of self-funding seems to disproportionately penalise some of those who interact with the system. After all, they are paying more than they would reasonably expect. The report recommends that the Home Office runs a wide-ranging public consultation on charging for borders, immigration and citizenship system functions to be completed and published in time to inform the 2019 comprehensive spending review, which I understand we are still waiting for. I wholeheartedly agree that an overhaul and a comprehensive review are needed to avoid the continuation of what I see as gross overcharging, especially if BICS continues with its self-funding ambition.

In response to the report’s recommendation, the Home Office has said it will be reviewing the ambition in the context of the 2019 comprehensive spending review. I understand that that is pencilled in, but I have no idea whether it is due or, for that matter, when the Minister will be reviewing it, so perhaps she can inform us. The Home Office expects there to be greater linkage on the basis of those who are already working to get a wage to bring their partner and their children to the country? These fees add extra financial stress to their capability and ability to bring their families to this country and reunite. Does he agree that we need appropriate fees that do not keep people’s families out of this country?

Hywel Williams: That is certainly the conclusion I have drawn in this particular case. I will refer later in my speech to the income threshold that is applied, which acts differentially in different parts of the country, and surely that pertains to Northern Ireland as it does to north-west Wales.

According to the Minister, the subsidy for the 2.5 million short-term visas issued each year for tourists costs in the region of £90 million per annum. While I accept that tourism is vital to the UK—it certainly is to Wales and my part of north Wales—and I understand the principle of making the UK as accessible as possible to tourists, I do not agree with making non-EEA spouses and other migrants shoulder the burden, particularly when the fee is four times what it should be, as compared with the real cost.

I was in business before I became an MP. Had I charged a fee for a service I was providing that was four times my costs, that would have amounted to profiteering, even allowing for a reasonable profit. Slightly tangentially, does the Minister have information to hand on where those tourists who apply for subsidised short-term visas end up visiting in the UK? Whose economy are we subsidising? Who benefits? Of course, the vast majority of tourists visit London. In fact—this will interest you, Mr Paisley, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—there were four times as many visits to London as there were to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. According to the Office for National Statistics and VisitBritain, almost 20 million tourists visited London in 2017. If we compare that with the 372,000 who visited Cardiff, hon. Members can see the point I am making. Who benefits from the subsidy, and who benefits disproportionately?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue for consideration in Westminster Hall. As he said, the increase in fees is astronomical. Does he share my concern on behalf of
three key principles in the setting of all fees: providing funding stability, instilling fairness throughout the system, and promoting prosperity and UK interests. I have no problem with those principles; the problem is with the application of the system in instilling fairness, because I do not think it is fair.

I have written to the Minister asking for a meeting to discuss the charging framework for visa and immigration services, but perhaps she can answer a few of my questions in this debate and we can avoid using her valuable time for a meeting. What progress has she made on reviewing the self-funding ambition, especially in line with the principle of instilling fairness throughout the system? Will she commit to holding a comprehensive review, as the chief inspector recommends?

In a previous Westminster Hall debate, the Minister stated:

“The charging framework for visa and immigration services delivered £1.35 billion of income in the last financial year, 2017-18. That helped to fund more than £620 million of costs associated with other immigration system functions”.—[Official Report, 4 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 20WH.]

It seems to my constituent, and I agree with her, that the British Government treat some parts of the immigration system as a profit-making wheeze, churning out and charging people according to their net financial worth, when what really matters is people’s rights and their dignity—people’s right to live together as a couple. If the Government are intent on using business-like jargon, what has the Minister’s Department done to promote cost-saving efficiencies—the other part of what I mentioned earlier—as a strategy for the future? It seems an obvious avenue worth exploring.

When constituents of mine are subjected to fees four times the unit cost, the system is obviously fundamentally flawed. For many people, the process of bringing over a spouse from abroad to live together here in the UK is complicated, arduous and costly. For the British Government, however, immigration bureaucracy has become quite the money spinner. Such a policy fits neatly with the Government’s unjust £30,000 immigration threshold, which I mentioned earlier in response to an intervention. It has a clear differential impact on areas of low wages, such as in my Arfon constituency. A £30,000 annual income might seem reasonable here in London, but in Arfon it is a small fortune that many people cannot even hope to achieve. The £30,000 threshold and the fee structure have been thrust on us by an Executive that know the price of something, but have no idea of the actual value, reducing everything, even the institution of marriage that they purport to support, to bean counting.

For the Government to charge spousal immigration applicants for administration costs is at best a burden, but to profit from it is unconscionable. The Home Office is pricing out couples who cannot afford an inflated charge of £1,523. The Immigration Minister must take a long, hard look at the visa fee structure system. We need an immigration system that abolishes arbitrary charges and instead treats people with the dignity that they deserve and to which they have a right.

11.14 am

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for securing this debate on the fee structure for immigration applications. I have listened carefully to his comments and can assure him that I am in no doubt about his strength of feeling on the topic, and I am of course aware of representations made by other Members, both in previous debates and in writing and through written questions. Before I respond to the specific points that he has raised today, I want to set out the current landscape for the fees that we charge for visa, immigration and nationality services.

The Immigration Act 2014 approved by Parliament set out the governing factors that must be given regard to when setting fee levels: the costs of administering the service; the benefits that are likely to accrue to the applicant upon a successful outcome; the costs of operating other parts of the immigration system; the promotion of economic growth; fees charged by or on behalf of Governments of other countries for comparable functions; and any international agreement. That is important because not only do those factors play an important role in our nation’s ability to fund the borders, immigration and citizenship system, but they are the only matters that can be taken into consideration when setting such fees.

In addition, there is a further layer of fees legislation by way of an order that sets the fee maxima that could ever be charged, which is laid in Parliament subject to affirmative resolution procedures. Finally, individual fee levels are then set out in regulations that are presented to Parliament and subjected to the negative procedure. I emphasise that as it is important to recognise that the Home Office cannot amend fee levels without first obtaining the approval of Whitehall and Parliament. A comprehensive system rightly ensures that there are a number of checks and balances in place to ensure that there is proper parliamentary oversight of the fee regime.

Fee levels are calculated in line with managing public money principles and the powers set out in the Immigration Act to reflect the value that people get from the services they receive. The powers that were agreed with Parliament in 2014 bring significant benefit to the borders, immigration and citizenship system and to the UK in the form of effective and secure border and immigration functions, reduced general taxation and the promotion of economic growth.

I recognise that there is significant interest in how fees are calculated, and we publish details of fee levels and estimated unit costs, as well as background information, on gov.uk to cover what is included and excluded from unit cost calculation. It is important to recognise the significance of the charging framework in funding visa and immigration services. For example, in the financial year 2017-18, £1.35 billion of income was delivered, which helped to fund the costs associated with other immigration system functions. That helped to maintain their effectiveness and security, and investment in ongoing service improvement.

Setting fees at such a level, putting the onus to pay on those who benefit from the services, reduces the burden on the Exchequer and on the general taxpayers of this country. A responsible Government have to balance the books. The loss of income resulting from any reduction in specific fees or drastic changes to policy would need to be balanced by rises elsewhere, or an additional taxpayer contribution. The Government remain focused on driving efficiencies throughout the system and on improving services. Our fee levels allow us to attract the
When we consider the future border and immigration system, it matters that we listen to voices from across the United Kingdom and across industry, and understand how we can interact as between the suggestion of expert economists that a £30,000 threshold for a tier 2 visa was about right and the concerns of certain sectors of industry. Of course, different parts of the United Kingdom have average salary levels that are different from those in, say, London and the south-east.

That is an important ongoing piece of work. I am sure that Members will be delighted to hear—there are two Members from Northern Ireland and one from Wales in the Chamber—that this summer I will again spend time in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, listening to the voices of those devolved nations and industries operating within them.

Importantly, the salary threshold for those wishing to bring a spouse and/or dependants into the country is not set at £30,000. The eligibility threshold to apply for a spousal visa is set at £18,600. That is designed to ensure that families can support themselves financially, and we ask for evidence that the sponsor can meet a minimum income threshold. There are additional requirements depending on the number of children. If the spouse has one child, the threshold rises to £22,400, and then by £2,400 per additional child.

The principle was to ensure that there was no dependency on our benefits system, and the threshold was set at a level at which people could be expected to be able to participate fully in society, and integrate into our communities. We in the Home Office, alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, continue to play an important part in ensuring that our system enables people to integrate into communities and play a full role in society. The principle has, of course, been consistently upheld by the courts, and has been tested rigorously.

As the hon. Gentleman alluded to, I have committed to keeping fees for visa, immigration and nationality services under review, and to take account of the issues raised in today’s debate and previous ones, in the light of the independent chief inspector’s recommendations. The Government are committed to ensuring that we have an effective border and immigration system that is not a burden on the Exchequer and the country’s general taxpayers. Decisions on how the system is funded are complicated and require a number of factors to be carefully balanced, as I have set out. However, I reiterate that the Government remain entirely dedicated to maintaining support for the vulnerable who come into contact with the immigration system, ensuring that they are treated fairly and humanely.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.
2.30 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK shared prosperity fund.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am pleased to see so many colleagues present to debate an issue that will affect all corners of the United Kingdom and all our communities.

There has been considerable discussion and debate, especially within the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland devolved Administrations, about the shared prosperity fund. Many of us have raised it formally with Ministers in written and oral questions, meetings and correspondence with the Government over the past year. However, it is right that today we take the opportunity to lead a national debate that seeks to heal the divisions in our country—divisions that were laid bare by Brexit but whose seeds were sown long before. Today is an opportunity to look at an important issue through the eyes of our communities, rather than through the prism of party politics.

The Government must respond to three key challenges: to accept that they cannot leave local areas facing major financial uncertainty, to signal that they trust devolved Administrations, mayoral combined authorities and local authorities to know their communities best, and to commit to a clear timetable for action. I speak not only as the Member for Barnsley Central, but as elected Mayor of the Sheffield city region—a unique position that gives me a unique perspective.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend on securing this important debate; I apologise that before too long I will have to leave it to chair a meeting. Is it not disappointing that, despite the promise to consult on the shared prosperity fund by the end of last year, we still do not know its terms or the amounts involved? Secondly, should the Government not make a simple promise that no area will be worse off if we leave the EU than if we had stayed in?

Dan Jarvis: I agree. I will make those points later in my speech.

I have seen at first hand what local areas can do when they come together to drive economic growth, but also how they can be limited and constrained by the powers and resources available to them. European or Government funding can often come with limitations that inhibit creative thinking, making it difficult to deliver significant structural changes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. When I was leader of Coventry City Council a long time ago, we badly needed regional aid, which at that time came from Europe. One thing that investors asked was what our skills, transport systems and so forth were like. If we could not answer those questions, sometimes we did not get the aid, and as a consequence we lobbied for regional aid for a couple of years. It is very important that we get some guarantees out of the Government, because whether we happen to live in Wales, Scotland or the west midlands, we need real answers. If we do not get them, investment will fall, costing us jobs. This is a very serious situation; I cannot stress that enough.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority on these matters. He has put his finger on the nub of the issue, which is that decisions that will have an impact on local communities are best made by those communities themselves. Through the devolution agenda, the Government have a very exciting opportunity to devolve not just decision making, but the powers and resources required to deliver those decisions.

I was expressing frustration about the criteria that are sometimes applied to pots of funding. Central Government funding in particular can often be short-term or pit places against one another. Sadly, at times it can be driven by political short-termism, by pork barrel politics or by who shouts loudest and longest. Under such circumstances, it is hard to plan for the future, and it can be more difficult to be strategic.

From 2020 onwards, the funding allocated to regions from the European Union will come to an end. From 2021, so will the funding allocated through the local growth fund programme. Together, the programmes have totalled billions of pounds of investment. The European funding element in the current programme alone has been worth €207 million for the Sheffield city region, €796 million for Yorkshire and the Humber, €513 million for Northern Ireland, €895 million for Scotland and €2.413 billion for Wales.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In the highlands, the European structural funds were awarded on properly assessed need for roads, harbours and suchlike. That funding was fantastic in halting continuing depopulation, that great curse of the highlands. If we get this wrong—if we do not get something proper in place of the funding—I fear that that ghost will haunt the highlands once again.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the timing for the funding running out and the possibility of taking a strategic view of funding for the future. Does he agree that the delay in publishing the consultation makes it even more difficult for people throughout the UK to think about strategic funding for the future and delivering projects for our communities?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly noted that in previous schemes that we have had in this country, assisted areas were pitted against one another. The European structural funds were just that—they were structural. They allowed us to invest in infrastructure, but also, importantly, in social projects. That dimension must not be lost.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will address in just a moment.
If we remained in the European Union, research produced by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions suggests that UK regions would receive €13 billion under the future EU cohesion programme.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He is making a powerful case, but as one of three Cornish MPs present, I have to note that he omitted Cornwall from his list of regions of the UK that have benefited significantly from regional growth funds and from European funds. It is important that we have this debate and that we encourage the Government to publish the consultation, but it is also important that we should work right now, as we are doing in Cornwall, on how to spend regional growth funds to the benefit of our communities. We do not have to wait for the consultation to come out; we can all work with our local authorities and businesses to shape the future funding arrangements. Will the hon. Gentleman encourage colleagues in this Chamber to work together to ensure that we learn from the lessons of the past and have funds that work for our areas?

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short.

Dan Jarvis: I hope very much that this debate will provide an opportunity for hon. Members to make points that they have sought to make for some time. On Cornwall specifically, if the hon. Lady bears with me for no more than a few seconds, she will, I hope, be pleased with what I am about to say.

I was saying that certain areas with a specific interest in the work of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions were due to get an even greater proportional increase: South Yorkshire, Tees Valley and Durham, Lincolnshire, southern Scotland, parts of outer London, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, west Wales and the valleys.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): And Devon.

Dan Jarvis: And Devon—I am grateful for that intervention.

Let me move back from Devon and Cornwall to South Yorkshire for just a moment. In South Yorkshire, we would have seen an increase from £117 per head to more than £500 per head. It is therefore my view that any future shared prosperity fund needs to replace the funds on the basis of what would have been received, had the referendum result been different.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On the question of how funds are allocated, does my hon. Friend agree that if there is any combination of needs-based formulae and competition, allocation on the basis of need should overwhelmingly be the most important factor to be taken into consideration?

Dan Jarvis: I do agree. My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I will say more about that later.

When it comes to the funding criteria for the shared prosperity fund, it is important to understand that resources previously received support some of the most vulnerable in our society, through projects delivered by charities from Mencap and the Salvation Army through to local and voluntary community organisations, such as South Yorkshire Housing and Sheffield Futures, in my patch—organisations rooted in our communities, born out of need and surviving in some cases by the skin of their teeth. The resources also support investment in high-profile, multimillion-pound research and innovation schemes. They unlock town and city regeneration. They provide business support and finance in urban and rural areas. They deliver sustainable development projects that support the low-carbon agenda. Taken together, these local growth and European funds have been the glue that holds our communities together.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I will be brief, as I know many others want to speak. Will the hon. Gentleman expand on that? Many of the areas he listed as the biggest beneficiaries of European structural funds were also areas that voted to leave the European Union. I was surprised to hear him say that we should have the same system, had the referendum result been different. Will he say why he thinks that people in many of those areas voted in such high numbers to leave?

Dan Jarvis: I do not think that that is an unreasonable question. We can have a debate if we like, although perhaps on another occasion, about why it was that people decided they wanted to leave the European Union. For many, it was because they felt that their local areas were not receiving the benefits that other, more affluent parts of the country were. This is a very good opportunity for the Government to seek to heal some of those divisions and invest in some of the communities that feel left behind. The United Kingdom shared prosperity fund must be designed and delivered so as to deliver on the aspirations of the communities such as the one that I am proud to represent. Those funds have previously done an incredibly important job in providing the glue that holds some of our communities together, creating new jobs, and in supporting disadvantaged and hard-to-reach communities that have often been neglected.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Employment Related Services Association has highlighted the very point that my hon. Friend makes—that these initiatives and organisations support people furthest away from the labour market. I used to be a Connexions manager and would draw down some of that funding to help young people who were not in education, employment or training. Does my hon. Friend agree that 2020 is just around the corner and people are getting desperate to plan and deliver those programmes?

Dan Jarvis: I do, and furthermore there is a real opportunity to place these resources in town halls and in mayoral combined authorities—in people who have their own democratic mandate to take decisions and allocate the resources in the most effective and efficient way.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He will know that, apart from Cornwall, the north-east and the Tees Valley are the areas that have received the most funding from the European regional
Germany and 16% in Sweden, yet local government controls only 1.6% of GDP. That figure is 6% in France, 11% in that local government in this country controls only 59% of all the OECD nations.

I am not sure whether the Minister is a regular reader—reported that our constituents have.

It has to be part of the solution to many of the concerns we face—but not necessarily address all the challenges that we face. We have to get the criteria right. We have to make sure that the formula in place is agreed by the regions and nations of our country. If we are serious about doing that, the shared prosperity fund is an incredibly important element and ingredient in it, but we have to design it in the right way. We have to get the criteria right. We have to make sure that the formula in place is agreed by the regions and nations of our country. That is why we need to get on with the consultation and make some progress.

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. This is a big opportunity for the Government and the next Government to invest money in our regional economies. I said at the outset that I hoped we would see this debate through the eyes of our communities and what is in their best interest, not through the prism of party politics. There will be a range of different views about Brexit and what it may or may not mean for our country, but I hope there is a unanimity of view on wanting to do the best for our country, whatever happens.

We have to invest money wisely and effectively in the regions and nations of our country. If we are serious about doing that, the shared prosperity fund is an incredibly important element and ingredient in it, but we have to design it in the right way. We have to get the criteria right. We have to make sure that the formula in place is agreed by the regions and nations of our country. That is why we need to get on with the consultation and make some progress.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is exactly right; she makes a powerful point. This is a big opportunity for the Government and the next Government to invest money in our regional economies. I said at the outset that I hoped we would see this debate through the eyes of our communities and what is in their best interest, not through the prism of party politics. There will be a range of different views about Brexit and what it may or may not mean for our country, but I hope there is a unanimity of view on wanting to do the best for our country, whatever happens. We want to invest money wisely and effectively in the regions and nations of our country. If we are serious about doing that, the shared prosperity fund is an incredibly important element and ingredient in it, but we have to design it in the right way. We have to get the criteria right. We have to make sure that the formula in place is agreed by the regions and nations of our country. That is why we need to get on with the consultation and make some progress.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It seems to me that, for one reason or another, moneys that have come from Europe—or that we have put in and that have come back to us from Europe—and moneys that a number of Governments have allocated have not dealt with the inequity in our country between north and south or between cities and towns. Does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever else happens in the future, unless there is an offer for our smaller towns and communities, no fund will match the expectations of those communities, or the demoralisation that they feel at how they have been treated by national Government and, for that matter, city government?

Dan Jarvis: As always, my right hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope that what is starting to emerge as a consensus in this place is that whatever happens over the next few weeks, months and years, business as usual and the way we have done our politics previously are not going to cut it. This is an opportunity to look at how we invest in our regional communities and to empower decision making at a regional and local level. That is not a silver bullet solution—it will not necessarily address all the challenges that we face—but it has to be part of the solution to many of the concerns that our constituents have.

My right hon. Friend provokes me to make another point. This country has one of the most centralised systems of public finance, policy making and political control of all the OECD nations. The Guardian—I am not sure whether the Minister is a regular reader—reported that local government in this country controls only 1.6% of GDP. That figure is 6% in France, 11% in Germany and 16% in Sweden, yet local government delivers around a quarter of all public services. The inevitable consequence is that decisions, however well meaning, do not always adequately reflect the needs or opportunities of local areas.

The issue is no more acute than in the way that successive Governments have decided where to prioritise investment. I have made this point many times before: when it comes to spending on transport infrastructure, the gap between more affluent areas, such as London and the south-east of England, and the north is particularly stark. Despite the work of the Minister and those in Government supporting the northern powerhouse, it is still the case that, since the northern powerhouse was introduced by the Government in 2014, public transport investment per person has been three times higher in London than in Yorkshire and the Humber.

It is no surprise that that is the case. However herculean the efforts of individual Ministers, the rules of engagement are stacked against us. The inequalities are built into the criteria of the Treasury Green Book model, which favours infrastructure development in more affluent areas, meeting existing demand rather than stimulating latent potential. In the words of my friend and neighbour, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham—himself a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury—the Government have “a tendency to shovel more and more into the areas that are already doing well.”

We see that in transport investment and other Government programmes.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Does he acknowledge that it is not just the north that suffers this problem? Some areas in the south-west have exactly the same difficulty. Does he agree that the Treasury should have other mechanisms, rather than looking at just the economic benefits? Perhaps it could look at the social benefits of putting money into areas such as his and mine.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree, and I always try to choose my words very carefully. Not for one moment will Labour try to pit the north against the south, or different parts of the country against each other. I absolutely accept that there are different needs in the remoter regions of our United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make the point that there are areas of deprivation in the south, south-west and south-east, and indeed in London, just as there are in the north. That is why it is so important that we take this opportunity to get the design of this fund right, so that every corner of the country will be best placed to benefit from it.

I was about to make the point that in 1960 the UK had the highest levels of productivity in Europe. Now, though, a French worker produces, on average, more by the end of Thursday than a worker in the UK does by the end of the week. In the UK, the gap between the richest and poorest regions is around 150%, which is almost twice as large as in France and three quarters larger than in Germany. Such gaps in wealth distribution and productivity are neither normal nor inevitable, but for some of our most deprived regions they are increasing.

The consequences of public policies and investment decisions entrench the economic and social divide. If we fix that, the prize will be huge.
[Dan Jarvis]

Looking at the north of England, Transport for the North’s “Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review” suggests that we could add £97 billion to our economy by 2025, which is over and above business-as-usual levels. Over the same period, we could add 850,000 jobs, which is also over and above business-as-usual levels. We can do that by focusing on what we are good at. In South Yorkshire, the same qualities that fired the world’s first industrial revolution now power our 21st-century advanced manufacturing and engineering story. Companies such as Rolls-Royce, Boeing and McLaren have chosen our region because we are in the vanguard of developing new materials and solutions to real-life manufacturing and engineering problems. This must be the start of our economic transformation, not the end. To go further, we must have the tools and resources.

Anne Marie Morris: Many valuable points have been made, but the points the hon. Gentleman is now making refer to prosperity. One of his colleagues asked earlier whether we are looking at meeting need or at driving prosperity—those two things almost conflict. My concern is about how much of this fund will be delivered through local enterprise partnerships, which will be looking competitively at growth, and how much will be delivered through local government, which will effectively be looking much more at need. Is the hon. Gentleman also concerned about ensuring that both issues are addressed? This concerns not just the areas where we will drive productivity; we need to get other areas up to at least a basic level, so that the need is at least average.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady asks the right questions, and the point of the debate is precisely to flush out these kinds of question. That is precisely why we need to have this consultation, so that collectively we can have that debate and put in place an arrangement—a formula or criteria—that serves our country in the way that I hope we would all want it to be served.

I was making some observations about the challenges that specifically relate to poor connectivity, issues regarding skills, and productivity. Owing to devolution, and hopefully the design of this fund, I am hugely positive about our ability at a regional and local level to address some of these challenges. Change is afoot, and there is growing recognition that the answers to these issues do not lie just in Whitehall or Westminster. The recent election of the North of Tyne Mayor—I know the Minister is quite enthusiastic about that recent election—means there are nine metro Mayors across England. They represent 20.7 million people, which is 37% of the population of England.

We are adding our voice to that of our friends and colleagues in devolved Administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales in calling for greater freedoms and resources to help us do our jobs. This is a powerful voice and one that, to be fair, I believe the Government listen to. The Government have made place central to their industrial strategy, recognising that no one size fits all, that each and every part of the UK has a different set of opportunities, and that different approaches are required to develop them.

Over the coming months, many of us will be working with the Government to develop our local industrial strategies—joint agreements that set out how central Government and local government will work together to grow our economy. With the creation of powerful sub-national transport bodies such as Transport for the North, we increasingly have the capacity, capability and voice to effect real change. Taken together, these new models of governance, the growing recognition of the importance of place, and an acceptance that the status quo cannot be allowed to persist suggest a brighter future.

That brings me back to the shared prosperity fund, which has to be part of the solution. With some frustration, I say that despite many interventions in the House—through written questions and correspondence with the Department—and despite many promises that consultation would take place, we do not yet have clarity on how much funding will be available, what activities will be eligible for support or who will take the decisions about how the money is spent. We know that the new fund will be a central pillar of the Chancellor’s spending review, and that Departments will be working on the development of the fund. On that basis, we have not been sitting idly by, waiting to be asked. Indeed, I commend the work of the all-party parliamentary group on post-Brexit funding, and the analysis and contributions of colleagues in local and regional government who have been addressing these issues.

I have set out my four guiding principles on which I think the fund should be developed, which are as follows. First, the annual budget for the UK’s shared prosperity fund should be no less in real terms than both the EU and local growth funding streams it replaces. It must guarantee that regions will not be worse off because of Brexit, in the funding available for regional development beyond 2020. Moreover, that should be a baseline rather than a cap.

Secondly, there should be no competitive bidding element. Instead, an open and transparent process must be put in place that strikes a balance between targeting areas of need and rebalancing our economy, and supporting economies that have the greatest potential to grow.

Thirdly, the fund must be fully devolved to those areas that have in place robust, democratically accountable governance models, including devolved Administrations, combined authorities and mayoralities. It must be up to local areas how best to invest this money, be it on skills, helping the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, infrastructure investment, employment or support and education. Fourthly, the funding must be stretched over multiple years, beyond the vagaries of spending reviews and parliamentary cycles.

I want to take this opportunity to implore the Government to unite the hands of our local areas—to trust that we know our communities and can develop, appraise and deliver projects on time, on budget and in line with local need and opportunity. The year-by-year drip-feed of central Government funding for local economic growth has to end. The imposition of priorities and projects has to end. The competing against, rather than collaborating with, our partners for funding has to end.

The shared prosperity fund will be a litmus test for this Government on their commitment to devolution; it will be the proof of the pudding. The central question is whether we all have the courage and the conviction to let go of powers and resources that for too long have sat in Westminster and Whitehall. If we want to tackle the scourge of regional inequalities and create a country
that works for all, let us be bold. Let us ensure that the shared prosperity fund does what it says on the tin: enable all our communities to share in this country’s economic growth, and prosper.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I ask Members to limit their contributions to three minutes. That includes any interventions, so if Members do not want to lose time, they should not give way.

2.59 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): In my constituency of Newton Abbot, workplace earnings are 78% of the national average; we have a higher percentage of people on carer’s allowance or disability allowance; we have three lower layer super output areas, or neighbourhoods, in the 20 most deprived areas of the country; and 40% of our jobs are part time, compared with the national average of 32.5%. How will a shared prosperity fund address all that? In Devon more broadly, productivity is 17% lower than the UK average, fewer people go on to higher education, 24%—almost 25%—of people are over 65, and 5% of people live in the most deprived wards in the country. We are disproportionately endeavouring to support small and medium-sized enterprises, farming and fishermen. It is therefore very important that support for that type of community is there for us, as it has been in the past.

Since 2014, in Devon we have had 29,000 new homes and 28,000 new business accommodation sites, £183,000 has been invested in infrastructure for broadband, and 2,000 new start-ups and 5,000 new training places have been established. However, we need clarity about how each individual area will get its share of the “cake” and what the criteria will be. We must ensure that there is an appropriate balance between dealing with competition to increase productivity, and accepting that some areas will never reach the Government target. We need to address their need to get them to the base starting point.

We need to be clear. Are we delivering through the LEPs and their industrial strategy? The LEPs certainly think we are, but my concern with that is that it is very competitive, and I cannot see that it will focus on needs. Or is it going to go through local government? That is not my understanding at the moment, but I think that at least some of it should. Clarity would be very much appreciated.

Devon has EU transition status, and we have 11 neighbourhoods in the 25% most deprived areas of the country. My concern is that if we start measuring productivity in those areas, we are measuring economic contribution divided by the number of individuals, rather than the number of workers. That means that we will always do worse. It is crucial that we look at the productivity question differently in rural and coastal areas. My ask for the Minister is that there should be a ring-fenced pot for rural and coastal communities so that, when we focus on the need of SMEs, we look at farmers and fishing. In particular, we should look at raising education and skill levels, because without that we can never get pay up, and investment in infrastructure, which at the moment is well below the national average. The requirement is always for match funding. It is a nice idea, but it does not work in a poor area.

3.2 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate.

The communities I serve are among the poorest parts of the European Union. According to Eurostat, we have a GDP ratio of only 68% of the EU average, whereas the corresponding figure down here in London—the richest part of the European Union by a country mile—is 614%. There are several reasons for that grotesque difference, but British Government policy is a key factor. Public spending per head in London is higher than it is in Wales, while infrastructure spending in London dwarfs the crumbs offered to my country. The trickle-down economics pursued by successive British Governments has failed the communities I serve.

Wales is not alone. Nine of the 10 poorest parts of northern Europe are within the British state. Every single nation and region within the British state, apart from London and the south-east of England, runs a deficit to the UK Treasury. The UK has a chronic under-productivity problem, as many hon. Members have already said. The easiest way to tackle that would be to target investment at the poorest parts of the British state.

My county of Carmarthenshire has hugely benefited from European structural funds. During the 2014-2020 programme, EU funds have so far assisted 611 enterprises, created 130 enterprises, generated 884 jobs, supported 877 people into work and helped 3,557 people to gain qualifications. Of all the nations and regions in the British state, west Wales and the valleys has the most to lose.

In the absence of any commitment from the British Government, Plaid Cymru has produced its own model for post-EU regional funding. Our approach is based on a few simple principles. First, we should receive not a penny less than what would have been available through future funding, as the people of Wales were promised during the referendum campaign. Secondly, decisions about Welsh funding should be made in Wales. A power grab of any nature that undermines the Welsh constitution will be met with fury. I hope the British Government are alive to the problems that they are brewing for themselves in my country.

Thirdly, the new framework must be ready to take over seamlessly from the end of EU structural funds. Fourthly, funds should be pre-allocated and not subjected to a competitive bidding process, which would inevitably mean that the poorest parts of the British state lose out. Finally, we believe that the programme funding in Wales should continue to meet the goals of European structural funds, including streams relating to employability and economic development.

3.5 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate. There is no question but that European structural funds have played a huge role in many of our regions and constituencies—in fact, the building in which my constituency office is located was built on the back of European money—so it is really important that we get to grips with this new fund.
The hon. Gentleman drew out a lot of the difficulties and conflicting ideas very well. One of the difficulties is that we all have a slightly different idea of what the prosperity fund should be trying to target, how it should look and what sorts of projects would fit into it. That is one of the reasons why we need the Government to move much more quickly and set out their view of how it should look.

Although EU structural funds have some real benefits and strong points, we have an opportunity to do things a bit differently. The pre-allocation over a seven-year period is too inflexible for what we will need. We need more flexibility so we can react more quickly to what is happening in the economy and to local areas. We must also look at how funding is allocated, and we should have a discussion about exactly how we will do that. I do not want the UK prosperity fund to become effectively an England-only fund, with money passed on under the Barnett formula to the devolved nations under the current funding formulae, which are not ring-fenced. That money could be used for things that are completely unrelated to the aims and purposes of the prosperity fund or to plug holes in other budgets. That is not a political point about a Conservative UK Government and an SNP Scottish Government; that problem will exist whoever is in power in either location.

If we are serious about using the UK shared prosperity fund to reduce inequalities among communities across the four nations, we must ensure that each and every part of the United Kingdom can benefit from it fairly. The Barnett formula is a pretty good argument that the devolved nations would actually lose out, rather than gain, under that arrangement. I hope the Minister agrees that that means that the UK prosperity fund should be operated as a single fund, based on need and not on where people live in the UK.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) gave a good example of how European funds have been very good in the highlands and have been targeted. If that were just a block of money that went to the Scottish Government as part of the Budget, there is no guarantee that a penny of it would reach the highlands or be targeted at the initiatives that have benefited under European arrangements.

I hope we will get a few answers from the Minister about the timing, what shape the Government think the structural fund will be, and how much money might be put in. I look forward to the introduction of the fund, because it is hugely important, but we absolutely must get it right, for all the reasons that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central set out.

3.8 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate, which is, I hope, an important opportunity for us to influence the way billions of pounds will be spent.

I think the point about maintaining minimum levels of expenditure is absolutely right, but if we simply adopt a carbon copy of the old EU scheme, we will have failed. What is the point of replacing a bureaucratic, unaccountable system with another bureaucratic, unaccountable system? That means that we must move away from the current regional format. It must definitely should not be run by and from Whitehall. It needs to be embedded in local communities and run by people from and accountable to the communities, and that means the local councils.

Let us take one example of what is wrong now. My town centre in Ellesmere Port has been struggling for a long time. Like many other northern towns, the rise of the internet and changes in shopping habits have led to shops closing down on a weekly basis. We need a new approach that regenerates the town centre, restores civic pride and gives people a positive reason to visit their high street and spend their money there. I am pleased that my local authority has bid for funding from the future high streets fund, but, realistically, if every town centre that bids gets a slice of the pie, there will never be enough to go round. The sums that we need for a truly transformative approach will not come from one pot alone. When a lot of the town centre is in private ownership, as mine is, there is a limit to what the public sector can physically do, but if the shared prosperity fund was operated in tandem with other funding pots, as the LGA suggests, there would be an opportunity for an integrated and creative approach that could lead to better outcomes for both funds.

We have spent a lot of time in here talking about what people meant when they voted leave, but not nearly enough about why they voted leave. We talk to ourselves, but not to the communities who voted leave. When will they be asked for their opinion and what their priorities are? When will they truly be given the opportunity to shape their own destinies? When will they be able to take back control? People already feel as though they do not have the power to make decisions about the most important things in their lives—whether a local hospital should stay open, where a new school might go or even how often the buses run—and the consequences are there for us all to see.

We need to think big and empower local communities. We do not need more crumbs from the table. Can we not see that people are fed up to the teeth with the patronising approach, not least because it clearly does not work for the vast majority? Power flows towards London. Wealth flows upwards into the hands of the elite. A Westminster handout on Westminster terms will not change that, and the sooner we realise that business as usual is not going to cut it, the better.

Our country is undergoing massive changes now, but with future automation the changes will accelerate and impact even more on those who can least afford it. We need to find a way to give communities responsibility and the power to shape their own futures.

3.11 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate. I agreed with many of the points that he made in his very good opening speech.

I represent a Cornish constituency. It is well known—it has already been mentioned in this debate—that Cornwall has been one of the biggest recipients of European economic support funding. Yet as the Minister pointed
out, Cornwall voted by a fairly substantial majority to leave the EU. There are reasons for that. It is largely because of the way in which European regional development funding has been spent in Cornwall, and there is a view that much of it has been wasted. During the past 20 years, Cornwall has received almost £1 billion of European funding, yet it has not achieved anywhere near what it was set up to achieve. In 2000, when the programme began, Cornish GDP was at 75% of the European average. The latest assessment is that we are at 68% of the European average, so despite three rounds of ERDF funding and almost £1 billion, we have fallen behind the rest of Europe.

There are good reasons for that: the European programmes are over-bureaucratic and difficult to access. In fact, the people in Cornwall who are most upset that we are leaving the EU are the consultants who have made a small fortune out of advising Cornish businesses on how to apply for European grants. They are the most upset people because their gravy train is coming to an end. Also, the programme has been far too prescriptive. We have been part of a centralised European programme that has not allowed people in Cornwall—the businesses and the local authority—to invest the money in the things that Cornwall really needs.

The shared prosperity fund is a brilliant opportunity for us to get it right. We can have a programme that is much more fit for purpose, less expensive to run, less bureaucratic and far more easily accessible to the businesses that need to access it in Cornwall. As many Members have said this afternoon, we have to grasp the opportunity to get a programme that is fit for purpose and delivers investment into our most deprived areas and really does do the job.

Some things are absolutely essential, as other Members have mentioned. Whatever fund is put in place has to be locally administered, because local people know better what local areas need. It has to be more easily accessible and less bureaucratic, and there has to be a single dedicated pot for places such as Cornwall so that we are not put in a position where we have to be competitive and therefore miss out. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that the consultation is brought forward as soon as possible.

3.15 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate. It comes at a crucial time, as we leave the European Union, but we must realise that the existing fundamental imbalance of investment, decision making and power across the country is a major reason that we saw the Brexit vote. For too long, Westminster has held the purse strings, made the decisions and held power over our communities. Is it any wonder that northern towns such as the one I represent feel isolated from the economic progress of our cities and isolated from the decisions that impact their daily lives?

For the constituents of Leigh, such isolation is not only metaphorical, but literal. My town has no rail connectivity. Decisions made in this place mean that my constituents struggle to access the employment, educational and social opportunities of our nearby cities, while outside investment is effectively blocked from flowing into our towns. My constituents in Leigh are left believing that, after nine years of Tory austerity, the country does not work for them. That is why it is important that the shared prosperity fund not only replaces vital EU funding, but restores their faith in our communities, gives them a voice, a stake in society and empowers them to transform local economies for the 21st-century economy.

At the heart of the debate is not just a matter of replacing funding, but instilling a sense of agency in our communities. We must therefore adopt a place-based approach, putting our constituents at the heart of transforming their areas and not leaving them to feel that they are receiving a pittance. Gone should be the days when a selected elite decide what is best for our local area. We must instead empower and entrust those whom the decisions impact the most.

One great example of how the current system is failing can be seen in the digital and cyber worlds. The Centre for Towns has found that 55% of digital jobs are in the south-east of England, with just 12% in the north. It is a tragedy. The only way we will reunite our country after years of austerity and Brexit-induced division is by empowering, entrusting and investing in our communities. We in this place must let local areas take back control to make the decisions that transform their towns while restoring their damaged trust and confidence in a society that should work for them.

3.17 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Cornwall has been a net beneficiary of objective 1 and convergence funding, as we have heard from other Members, for the past 20 years. If we step away from the coastal towns that many people visit on holiday, we find pockets of rural deprivation that successive Governments have found difficult to identify. Although the moneys that have flowed into Cornwall have been welcome, there have been challenges with how the money has been administered. I want to raise those challenges with the Minister today in the hope that we can avoid them when we allocate the shared prosperity fund.

Cornwall was a net recipient of almost £1 billion over 20 years. Although there have been some noteworthy allocations of the cash—probably the most important and successful was the roll-out of superfast broadband across Cornwall—much of the money was allocated to buildings and industrial parks. Without a strategic investment plan, the net result over the past 20 years has not really moved the dial. Much of the failure came from the application process and does not reflect any lack of will by the people administering the funds. Most of the businesses in North Cornwall are small family businesses employing between five and 10 people. They generally work six days a week, 10 hours a day, and did not have compliance teams that could pore over complex and onerous forms. There was therefore a tendency for the bigger companies and charities to put in their bids, and because they had the time and the resources, they were able to make the applications that the small businesses were unable to.

One stat that struck me was in a recent cost-benefit analysis of the objective 1 funding: for every £250,000 that was spent, Cornwall was the net beneficiary of one job. That fundamentally illustrates why small businesses were unable to access the money when that is exactly
where it needs to go. Can we simplify the application process to make the shared prosperity fund easier to access? The countryside productivity small grants scheme, a similar fund, is administered by DEFRA, which is simpler and much more straightforward.

We are still waiting. After assurances that the funding criteria would be in place, we are still in the dark. I encourage the Minister to lay out the fund as soon as is practical, so that Cornwall can benefit. Cornwall has seen historic growth over the last five years. Unemployment is at record lows and tourism in the county is booming off the back of great weather and the devaluation of the pound.

Many of the small businesses in North Cornwall are exporting for the first time, but we need to start investing in people. Young people growing up and going through secondary education and college will now work until they are 80 and will have at least four careers in their lifetimes. The Government need to invest in those young people in college and give them a future by moving the dial on their social mobility.

In summary, we need a more straightforward process, quicker allocation and the apprenticeships and investment in skills that our young people need.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on bringing this issue to the Chamber. I am sure that I am not the only one who longs for a prosperous UK. I, alongside 17.4 million others, believe that that means a UK outside the EU. The vote must be respected and if integrity, honesty and simple human decency have anything to do with it, we will leave.

To replace the EU structural fund, which is reputedly worth £2.4 billion annually, we must continue to reduce inequalities between communities. There must be wise consideration to decide how the UK shared prosperity fund will be formed and distributed. In the past, that was done by identifying the priorities and objectives, the amount of money to be allocated, the method of allocation between countries and regions of the UK—the hon. Member for Barnsley Central said that the fund should be driven regionally, which is correct—the model by which funding will be allocated, whether pre-allocating an amount for a country or region or inviting competitive bids from across the UK, the length of the planning period, and deciding who administers the funds and whether they are controlled from Westminster or by the devolved Administrations. Clearly, neither should be involved; it should be done by devolved authorities or local councils depending on the issue.

It is time for me to put my spoke in. I firmly believe that the fund must be administered at a regional level and, at the very least, to the same level of support as before. Brexit was not an attempt to save a single penny but to manage every penny to greatest effect. That is what we must try to do in the short time available.

The European structural investment fund consisted of four moneys coming from the EU: the European regional development fund, the European social fund, the European maritime and fisheries fund and the European agricultural fund for rural development. Of those, the ERDF and ESF account for over 60% of ESI funding over the programming period of 2014 to 2020—they are very important to my constituency of Strangford.

Strangford, through the fisheries fund and others, has certainly seen improvements to businesses and communities that would be left to languish were money distributed per capita. Although we received only 10% of EMFF money for Northern Ireland for our fleets and communities, clearly that level of support must continue at the very least.

Simply put, our fishing community, including suppliers, producers and all the rest, could not make the needed improvements to fleets or diversification in the communities to help sustainability without the fund. I believe that the same level of money must be delivered, and I stand today to speak for the communities who rely on the fund.

We need a regional hands-on approach that helps those in need to continue or enhance what they are already doing. That opportunity must be seized so that local people can make local decisions and local differences with their own funding. It is time to get the fund in place and make it accessible to those who can use it for business that will impact the local economy in the local community.

3.24 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this timely debate. Interestingly, we have had two debates on this matter in the last two weeks, and I feel that more will come.

My constituency of Ogmore relies enormously on regional development funding from the European Union, whether it goes towards supporting businesses, opening the new train station in Llanharan, or the future redevelopment of the much-loved Maesteg town hall. Those projects really matter to my constituents, so it is important that the Minister understands that all hon. Members across the House need decisions to be made. We need to know when the consultation will start and—as soon as possible—how much assurance we can give to our communities that those funds will continue and will not be means-tested or business-led, but distributed on the basis of need.

Some of the poorest communities, including my own, need the funding to continue beyond 2020. The Government’s austerity drive over the last nine years has meant that the Welsh Government have lost almost £1 billion in investment. That is £4 billion in real terms. The £680 million that is delivered to Wales through membership of the European Union is hugely important to communities up and down Wales.

Much of the work done with the European funding that is given to communities across Wales is done with the support of the Welsh Labour Government. Over the last 18 months to two years, we have been told many times that consultations will start, but they do not. We ask questions of Ministers, but they do not have the answers. I have asked Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Treasury and the Wales Office, and no one seems to have any answers about when the funding will start, how it will be allocated and, importantly, how it will be managed.
Every hon. Member here has made it clear that it is extremely important that decisions are made locally by devolved institutions, mayoralities, councils or whatever it may be. A key point is that the Tory Government must not use this matter to rewrite the devolution settlement of the United Kingdom. It is absolutely pivotal to any forward planning for a shared prosperity fund that future decisions are made by the Welsh Labour Government, so that they can provide certainty to business, local authorities and further and higher education institutions.

At the moment, nothing from the UK Government suggests that those decisions will be made locally. In fact, Conservative Back Benchers frequently say that perhaps the Welsh Government can be bypassed and the money delivered directly to Welsh local authorities. That simply cannot be allowed to happen. We have a devolution settlement for Wales that must be respected. It is extremely important that those decisions are made locally, and that the funds target the most deprived communities across Wales and the United Kingdom.

3.27 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate.

In the 1980s, when the Thatcher Government broke the industries on which our economy was built—steel and coal—we faced really tough times in South Yorkshire. We sunk to become one of the poorest regions in Europe, and because of that, the EU stepped in with funding. In reply to some of the comments that have been made, I say that that funding responded to what we asked for locally and funded programmes that were delivered by local organisations.

European structural funds were key to rebuilding our economy. Objective 1 funding provided £820 million to more than 250 organisations and 650 projects, from major projects such as the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, which has become a national flagship for industrial innovation, to small community initiatives that reskill people. The economy grew by 8.5%.

Shamefully, under Government policy since 2010, regional inequality has grown again. We are back where we were before: below 75% of the average gross domestic product of the EU and one of the poorest regions in Europe—formally designated a “less developed region” along with Tees Valley and Durham, Lincolnshire, west Wales and Cornwall, which have been mentioned.

On those regions, the February report from Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central mentioned, stated this for 2021 to 2027:

“All five of these regions would stand to receive EU support in excess of €500 euros per capita for the seven-year period.”

That would mean £605 million for South Yorkshire.

I was puzzled by the Minister’s intervention, as he seemed to suggest that because those areas voted leave they should not expect to receive that funding. That is not what they were promised in the referendum campaign, nor was it what they were promised subsequently.

Jake Berry: Nor was that what I said.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I hope he will respond to the question that I am about to ask.

To cast our minds back, we were promised that we would not be worse off, and in February I wrote to the Secretary of State, asking him to commit to providing the £605 million that we would have received had the country remained a member of the European Union. Replying on behalf of the Secretary of State, the Minister sidestepped the question and instead told me about a stakeholder event in Huddersfield—I am sure it was very useful. Today, I again ask that simple question: will the Government commit to providing regional development funding that is equivalent to the money we would have received from the European Union as less developed regions—yes or no?

3.30 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on an outstanding speech and on securing this debate. As things stand, we still do not know how much funding will be available, how it will be divided across the country, what activities will be eligible for support and who will decide how the money is spent. But this is not just about money—there is a real fear that it will be not only a financial grab, but a power grab, and that the Westminster Government will use this opportunity to reduce funding for the areas that need it most, and to claw back powers that sit naturally with devolved Administrations and other local areas.

Those deep-seated concerns led to the creation of the all-party group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, which I am truly proud to chair. Our wide-ranging review of 80 organisations across the UK heard clear and unanimous representations that the UK’s shared prosperity fund must comprise not a single penny less in real terms than the EU and UK funding streams it replaces. Westminster must not use Brexit as an opportunity to short-change the poorest parts of the UK. Equally, the UK Government must not prevent local areas from having appropriate control over the funds.

Although it is disappointing that the Minister has so far refused to meet our group, last month officers from our APPG met the Secretary of State for Wales to make those points, and last week they met 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, there was a suggestion that the consultation may 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 the relevant bodies are supposed to contribute meaningfully, when the horse will have already bolted. I assure the Minister, however, that our APPG will be watching carefully to ensure there is no sleight of hand from the Government on that point.

We need a guarantee that the SPF budget will not be a penny less than current and projected EU funding, and that the devolution settlement will be fully respected. We need clarity about when the SPF consultation will be published. The great advantage of the current system...
[Stephen Kinnock]

is that it is data driven and evidence based, thus guarding against pork barrel politics. There is a fundamental worry that the SPF will become a politicised slush fund, with a Conservative Government using it to buy votes in marginal seats. I hope that the Minister’s response today reassures us that our constituencies will not be left short-changed by a sleight of hand in Westminster.

3.33 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important and timely debate. We have all been waiting far too long for details on this matter. The hon. Gentleman spoke about looking through the eyes of communities, and his challenges to the Minister were repeated by many others in the Chamber. We must respect the devolved Parliaments and ensure that badly needed regional aid is in place. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) intervened to speak about the dangers of listening to who shouts the loudest, and of pork barrel decision making.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned data from the conference of peripheral maritime regions—I must declare an interest because, as a former leader of Highland Council, I am a former vice-president of that body—and the data were very detailed. He highlighted £895 million for Scotland in this spending round, including £180 million for the highlands and islands. For the Minister’s benefit, I remind hon. Members that both that country and that region voted in great numbers to remain in the European Union.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke about the funding being used to challenge depopulation, as well as other issues that have gone unaddressed by Westminster Governments for many years. Indeed, one symbol of European funding joins our two constituencies. After decades of no or little investment in the highlands and islands, the Kessock bridge that now spans our constituencies was made possible only by EU funding—something people in the highlands are very much aware of.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central spoke about supporting the most vulnerable, and he mentioned the need for regeneration and business support, and the low-carbon agenda that comes with such funding. In response to an intervention, he recognised that people are becoming desperate for information, which is true—people are desperate to find out where such support will now come from. The devolved Administrations must be told what the money will be, how it will be used and how it will work. Currently, they do not have clarity about how much money there is, when it will be allocated and to whom, or how the system will work.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the guiding principles of there being no less money than already exists, that the regions must not be worse off and that the system should be fully devolved. This funding must go beyond parliamentary cycles and spending reviews.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
is drawing the Government’s business and long-term planning to a halt, they should shun article 50—not the concept of long-term planning.

I do not have much time and I want to make sure that the other Front-Bench speaker and the Minister have the opportunity to contribute, so I will wrap up with these words, although there is much more I could say on this subject. Where is the post-Brexit funding? Communities and charities want to know where it is and they need the details urgently. When is it to be revealed? Will it respect the devolution settlement and prove not to be just another power grab?

It is not good enough that this Government are tied in knots and uncertain of the future. If the UK Government’s long-term planning has ground to a halt, they must get past that and get the details to people and communities of how the money will be distributed. We already know that Brexit will cost Scottish communities millions, so they need details on funding urgently. Our people cannot be left behind by a Government who are too chaotic to get out the details of how they will support communities.

3.41 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate.

It is not just about money, but is a power grab by Government (Stephen Kinnock) spoke about the perception that this is not just about money, but is a power grab by Government to retain as much power as they can centrally and not distribute it anywhere. I congratulate him on his work on this issue in the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, which holds the Government to account and works in partnership to try to create a new way forward that provides an alternative.

The importance of EU structural funds has been set out in the debate, but it is worth highlighting again the importance of the £17.2 billion of investment directed at some of the most significant regions that have not shared the capital’s booming fortunes. The EU regional development fund has focused £655 million on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. It has supported research and innovation with £342 million and invested £197 million towards a low-carbon economy. The EU social fund tackles head-on the barriers preventing people in towns such as mine from accessing the labour market and decent, well-paid and secure jobs. Almost £1 billion has been spent on developing an inclusive labour market, with more than £333 million further to develop new skills that are vital for accessing jobs and vital for the future of our economy.

There are very real concerns about the Government’s intent in this agenda. We have heard not just concerns about the places that people represent, but a significant amount of distrust in the background motives of the Government. There is little wonder why: we have seen nearly a decade of austerity targeted at the most deprived communities, where vital public services have been taken away from areas that could least afford it and that have seen the biggest cuts. The evidence tells us that the Government are not in the game of sticking up for the most deprived communities—the very people we represent in this place. Left to their own devices, what would the Government do with the opportunity to recast the fund, and what might that mean for the communities we represent?

The same is true of education funding, skills funding and further education funding, all of which are under chronic pressure. The same continues to be true of UK capital investment spend, where our regions are held back by a failure to invest in growth. We have seen that on transport investment and housing investment; across almost every line of central Government, capital investment favours the capital of the UK. What about our regions? If we want the UK to be the best that it can be, every one of our regions must be the best that it can be—not just the cities and city regions, but our towns.

There is real fear that what might follow is a competitive process that pitches one area against the next, with rules dictated by a centralising Government who do not want to give power away and have always neglected our towns and our most deprived communities. We might see that the rules are doubly stacked up against getting the money to the very communities and people who ought to be beneficiaries.

Today, the Minister can put some meat on the bones. He can explain why there has been a significant delay in the consultation. He can outline what a future fund might look like: how will local people have agency and be involved? How will we make sure that our towns benefit as much as our cities do? How can we make sure that this is not a pot of money in isolation, but a wholly different approach to how Government spend their money—not just favours the capital and doing it the easiest way possible, but making sure that every part of the UK gets the money that it needs?

Why has this taken so long? We are nearly three years in from the EU referendum. Had we left on 29 March, we would have been six weeks out of the European...
Union, but there is not even a programme in place for spending the money that should go to our regions post Brexit. The Government might have been saved by a temporary relief, but at some point they will have to put pen to paper and set out exactly what they have in mind, and make sure that local people are included. I hope that the Minister takes from this debate the fact that there is a great deal of interest, and that the MPs who have spoken are not going away. They will come back if answers do not come forward.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I start in the traditional way by congratulating the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on an excellent speech. As with so many things that we do together, with our shared passion to drive forward the economy of the northern powerhouse, there was very little I disagreed with in his speech, although there were a few things I will mention if I get the opportunity. Many Members asked similar questions, so before I deal with individual contributions I will address some of the more general points.

Let us be realistic about this debate: Members have picked me up on my saying that many areas that voted to leave have been recipients of EU structural funds. One of my jobs in Government is administering many EU structural funds, and some Opposition Members may have done that job during the Labour Government. Those funds are hugely bureaucratic, and they do not target many of the things that we are desperate, across the Chamber, to drive forward the economy of the northern powerhouse, there was very little I disagreed with in his speech, although there were a few things I will mention if I get the opportunity. Many Members asked similar questions, so before I deal with individual contributions I will address some of the more general points.

My hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) made interesting points about how some of those funds have been wasted in Cornwall. I suspect that may be part of the reason—although I would be the first to accept that the picture is very complicated—why 68% of the people who live in Barnsley and 60% of the people who live in Oldham voted to leave the European Union. We in this place have to address some of the foundations of the UK shared prosperity fund that would be designed to reduce inequalities between communities across the four nations of our United Kingdom and target productivity. That was reiterated by my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary in a written ministerial statement in July 2018 laying out some of the foundations of the UK shared prosperity fund.

The Government accept that tackling inequality is absolutely something we need to grip in this country. The hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) mentioned that Leigh, which I know well—it is just down the road from my constituency—does not have a railway station. It is not the case that there was a railway station there that was closed by a Conservative Government; that is a sign of decades of under-investment in northern transport infrastructure by successive Governments. The UK shared prosperity fund should seek to challenge some of the inequalities that we see north, south, east and west across the United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr: The Minister has mentioned inequalities several times. I want to be absolutely clear that the Government are committed to ensuring that the shared prosperity fund is led by need and, in respect of Scotland specifically, that the money is not Barnettised. It may be ring-fenced, but it must not be Barnettised.

Jake Berry: I am not able to give that commitment today, because we are going to have an active consultation.

Stephen Kinnock: When?

Jake Berry: If Members give me the opportunity to say when, I may try to provide an answer. One of the points we heard was that we must respect the devolution settlement across our United Kingdom. For me, as the Minister with responsibility for the northern powerhouse and devolution, that means respecting the devolution settlements that this Government have brought forward, by which I mean mayoral devolution in England, which now covers 48% of the north of England.

Jim McMahon: I understand why the Minister does not want to go down the cul-de-sac of the Barnett formula, but can he confirm that no region will be worse off than it is under the current programme?

Jake Berry: As the hon. Gentleman knows and I was just about to say, the quantum of the UK shared prosperity fund will be determined as part of the comprehensive spending review. That is the appropriate time for the Government to make commitments of the sort he seeks. However, he and the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) are correct that the Government must come forward with their consultation—I am clear that this must happen—before the comprehensive spending review to enable areas to contribute to that consultation.

We have not been sitting on our hands, as people who have listened to the debate may think. We have already engaged with more than 500 stakeholders. We have had 25 official-level engagements across the country, including with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations. In addition, in my role as Minister for the northern powerhouse, I have engaged with mayors. I have talked to them specifically about how we can work together to
provide evidence to the consultation that demonstrates that, as so many people have said, the impetus for investment of the UK shared prosperity fund should come from our regions rather than being directed out of Whitehall.

Having listened to contributions to the debate, I think everyone believes that it would be nice if that happened. The point is that by working with our metro Mayors, our local enterprise partnerships and authorities across England—that is certainly my role as English Minister for local growth—to create the evidence base, we can move beyond thinking that it would be nice to proving that it is how we will get the biggest return on investment. There is work ongoing in my Department, in advance of the consultation, to ensure that that hugely important argument is made, and won, when my dear chums in the Treasury are making decisions about how the money should be distributed following the consultation. I hope that answers some of the questions that Members asked. My response to the main question is that the consultation will start very shortly.

Let me move on to some of the specific points that were made. On public transport investment, Members may not have seen the most up-to-date figures, which are available on the Treasury website. They show that transport capital expenditure is higher per capita in the north of England than in London. People often talk about total capital expenditure across the north of England versus London. There are some parts of the north of England where very few people live, so it is much more realistic to talk about capital expenditure per capita, and it is higher per capita in the north of England.

Many colleagues talked about the weakness of Green Book calculations for making investment decisions, which I think is acknowledged across the House. That is why the Government came forward with a rebalancing formula that defines how we are going to do it. That formula looks at areas that are less developed, depending on how we define that, and at factoring future growth into Green Book calculations. Changes have been made recently to ensure that community benefit is also included in such calculations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) commented on the ring-fencing of coastal money. By the end of the current spending period, the Government will have invested £200 million directly in coastal communities through our coastal communities fund, which is about driving prosperity on our coasts. The UK shared prosperity fund must not be viewed on its own as the only support the Government give to drive regional growth. We have contributed £53 million to part of the exciting growth deal in the highlands and islands, which has resulted in things such as the north coast 500 route, which I hope to visit this summer, prospering.

**Drew Hendry**

**Jake Berry:** I will let the hon. Gentleman advise me about the best place to stay.

**Drew Hendry:** I am grateful to the Minister for raising that money for the Inverness city region deal. Will he go a step further and match 50:50 the commitment of the Scottish Government, who put considerably more money into that deal than the UK Government did?

**Jake Berry:** We will have to look at how much new money the Scottish Government have committed. Since we have talked repeatedly about devolution, particularly from a Scottish viewpoint, I note that the Smith commission agreement, which was signed by all parties in Edinburgh, contains a commitment by the Scottish Government to look at further devolution to local councils in Scotland. Devolution does not stop in Edinburgh, but I understand that no progress has been made on that.

I could go on, and I would like to, but I want to give the hon. Member for Barnsley Central the customary time to conclude the debate. I hope that colleagues do not doubt the Government’s commitment not just to devolution, but to regional growth. The UK shared prosperity fund, which we will consult fully on shortly, will continue that commitment to driving productivity and growth everywhere.

**3.58 pm**

**Dan Jarvis:** I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this important issue, and I thank everyone who contributed; we heard from people representing every corner of the United Kingdom. The debate teased out some big and important, but in some cases still unanswered, questions. There is an urgent requirement for clarity about the design of the fund—how it will work and how it will be administered. There is also a need to guarantee that, at the very least, our communities will not be worse off. That is the right thing to do, not least because, at this very difficult time for our country, if we want it to be both successful and united, we need to ensure that we get rid of the systemic inequalities between our regions and our nations. If we are serious about doing that, the shared prosperity fund will have a very important role to play. Let us get on with it and work out how we are going to do it.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered the UK shared prosperity fund.
Medical Aesthetics Industry: Regulation

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

4 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of the aesthetics industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I am again grateful to lead a debate on this issue, which is becoming more pressing and may affect many of our constituents. The previous debate on this topic was successful, and I thank those who took part and contributed. I also mention my constituent, Rachael Knappier, who has been brave enough to tell her story and who initially brought this issue to my attention.

As some Members will remember, Rachael received a lip filler from an unregulated beautician, who accidently injected it into her artery, causing a trauma to her lip. In January, I raised this with the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions. Since then, some progress has been made by the Government and I welcome the announcement made today, but more progress is required. Following my championing of the issue, I am glad that the Government have begun to act. The Department of Health and Social Care is today launching a campaign to encourage consumers to seek professional advice when considering having procedures such as Botox, dermal fillers and cosmetic surgery.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. As he rightly says, there is need for a tightening of the regulations. In the media, there are children as young as 15 with botched lip fillers and injections; we need to do more to protect those children.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must ensure that only medically-trained professionals, with a duty of care provided by their professional boards, carry out these procedures, under very strict regulations?

Alberto Costa: The hon. Gentleman is correct. We need to ensure that we have appropriate regulation with these procedures, or similar types of procedure. He is right to raise this issue on behalf of his constituents.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. He will be aware of its importance as he is a vice-chair—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and me—of the all-party parliamentary group on beauty, wellbeing and aesthetics. Does he agree that any new regulations that come forward need to consider non-medical regulation? We need to ensure we have properly qualified beauticians, with recognised qualifications, to carry out these procedures.

Alberto Costa: The hon. Lady is correct. I pay tribute to her and to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for setting up the new all-party parliamentary group on beauty, wellbeing and aesthetics, along with me. I look forward to her interventions at meetings of that all-party group; I know she has a great deal of knowledge of this area. I agree that we do not want to stifle the beauty industry—we want it to grow and be successful—but we all want to protect our constituents.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on setting up the APPG. I am the chair of the APPG on the hair industry and I am keenly interested in this development. A possible solution to the problem has been put forward by the British Association of Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology. It appreciates the concerns about mandatory registration, but thinks that a regulatory framework, led by the Government, would be difficult to implement and that the voluntary self-regulatory framework is not working either. BABTAC believes that the time has come for the Government to institute a mandatory regulatory framework that would be self-governing and would include BABTAC and the Royal College of Surgeons. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

Alberto Costa: I agree. The hon. Gentleman has been doing sterling work on behalf of his constituents in related matters with his sister-APPG, and we wish him every success with that. He is right that we have to look at the issue in the round and include professionals who are experts in the field, who contribute to our economy and who themselves want a properly regulated beauty industry.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is on a bit of roll with interventions.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done. A professional from a skin clinic in Ribble Valley came to see me at my surgery on Saturday. He told me that somebody could administer Botox—actually inject something into someone’s face—without proper certificates and perhaps even without proper training. He showed me photographs of instances where, sadly, the treatment had gone badly wrong. It is the NHS that has to pick up the misery, and in some cases it is far too late. I congratulate him on what he is doing, but we must get change in the system before more tragedy and misery occur.

Alberto Costa: My hon. Friend is correct. I am sorry to learn of the incidents he heard about from his constituent at his surgery. I had a similar matter. Indeed, that is what prompted me to champion this issue, along with other hon. Members.

I pay tribute to the Minister at this early stage of the debate. The welcome moves that she has introduced today, by coincidence, are exactly the sort of moves we want; they are on the right path. Today, we are arguing for more, and I am confident she is in listening mode.

Save Face, a Government-approved register for accredited practitioners, highlighted in its audit report last year that it had received just under 1,000 complaints about unregistered practitioners. This register is not compulsory and there are thousands of practitioners who have chosen not to sign up. The mark of a professional is someone who is regulated, qualified and licensed. They do not need to be a medic or a nurse to be able to be regulated, qualified or licensed to practise in this field. In the private sector, professionals such as solicitors—I declare an interest, as I am a solicitor—are regulated,
have to be qualified and have to have an annual licence. Most importantly, they are obligated to carry professional indemnity insurance. That marks out those who are professionals and those who are not. That is why we urgently need a professional regulatory body for this industry.

Let me give a simple example. As a nation of animal lovers, we would not consider taking a cat, a dog or even a hamster to an unregulated vet to have an injection. Therefore, why are we allowing our constituents to have potential poison injected into them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) mentioned?

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend makes some good points about the need for better regulation. The challenge is about who we would be regulating, how we would set up a new body and how indemnity insurance would work for people working in the cosmetics industry. We know that healthcare professionals who do cosmetics have indemnity insurance; they have a regulated body they can be held accountable to. Would it not be better, as the Keogh review looked at, to have other practitioners responsible to healthcare professionals, so they had the oversight of healthcare professionals, who would make sure they were engaging in their practices correctly? Is that not an easier way to put into place quickly and effectively something that could actually deal with the issue of regulation?

Alberto Costa: My hon. Friend, in his time as the relevant Minister in this area, contributed enormously to this field, and I pay tribute to the work he has done in pushing for regulation of the industry.

I am not sure how to answer my hon. Friend’s point, because regulation takes many different forms. I think we would all argue that we want a healthy, thriving, competitive beauty industry. We do not want to strangle it or place an unnecessary obstacle before the business. We seek to achieve a safe beauty industry, where our constituents can approach any beautician of their choice, safe in the knowledge that these individuals have been properly trained and are qualified and regulated. I am certainly up for having the debate on whether they should be regulated by the General Medical Council, the overarching regulator of healthcare professionals or some other regulatory body, but regulation is the key.

I would also like to highlight the distinct difference between Botox and dermal fillers. Botox is a prescription-only medicine that can be prescribed only by a regulated healthcare professional, such as somebody regulated by the GMC. However, there is a loophole. At present, the prescriber is able to delegate the administration of the injections to another person, which unfortunately creates a way for people who are perhaps not regulated at all to administer the product. On the point my hon. Friend made a moment ago, if we were to have a regulatory body that somehow was able to delegate to others, we would have to ensure that those to whom the administration of the procedure was delegated were suitably trained to administer the procedures.

It is evident that these procedures are becoming more popular, and social media has an influence: so many young people are having procedures such as dermal fillers and Botox that that is almost normalising them. Given that the procedures are so widely seen on social media, they are being viewed by young people as equivalent to, for example, having one’s hair cut, as they are just as accessible. I have heard that people will say, “I’m just going out to have my lips done,” just as we might say, “I’m just popping out to have my hair done.” The normalisation of a procedure that can result in trauma should be looked at carefully.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Freyja Medical, in my constituency, provides an excellent service, but it also pointed out to me the important role that it sees Parliament performing in highlighting the impact and consequences of some of the very poor work that is carried out on individuals. I would certainly like to join the all-party parliamentary group, and I think one of the most important things we must do is get the message out to people on how dangerous the administration of these products can be.

Alberto Costa: I agree entirely, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to join both the excellent APPG of the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally), and that set up by the hon. Members for Swansea East and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and me. They are complementary APPGs and we would welcome the hon. Gentleman’s interest and expertise.

I mentioned a moment ago that this debate should not centre on the conversation about medics or non-medics carrying out these procedures; I believe it is fine for properly qualified and regulated beauticians to be able to offer them. I also highlight the fact that people who receive botched fillers often end up having to go to our national health service to pick up the pieces, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned a moment ago, so that ultimately the taxpayer has to foot the bill.

As the Keogh review concluded:

“Dermal fillers are a particular cause for concern as anyone can set themselves up as a practitioner, with no requirement for knowledge, training or previous experience.”

In February 2014, it was made illegal to offer dermal fillers without training, but the training has not been clearly defined, and some of those who may be qualified to give lip fillers may not have the necessary training to be able to dissolve them or identify when something has gone wrong. We have met or heard from beauticians who would argue that they are properly trained or qualified, but in some instances they can be trained or qualified only for one part of the procedure, and not necessarily for when things go wrong. Surely, anyone carrying out these procedures should be able to identify when things have gone wrong and remedy them immediately.

The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons would like to see the development of clinical guidelines on the use of dermal fillers. The Royal College of Surgeons has also expressed that it would like to see dermal fillers classified as a prescription-only medicine. Serious complications of cosmetic procedures can include infection, nerve damage, blindness, blood clots and scarring. That links to what the Government have helpfully announced today, as the campaign will help to inform consumers of those risks. They are also recommending that consumers go to a regulated healthcare professional.
The medical director at NHS England, Professor Stephen Powis, has said that professionals who provide procedures such as fillers should be encouraged to join the new Joint Council for Cosmetic Practitioners. That is very sensible, as it has been set up to assist members of the public, although it is not obligatory. We also face the surrounding issue of body dysmorphia and mental health. Professor Powis has also argued that practitioners should be officially registered and trained to identify people who may be suffering from a body image or other mental-health-related issue.

Social media is a powerful tool for young people to look at and to share their experiences. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are often used as a principal source of information when people are researching fillers and Botox. I argue that that should not be the case: education on those matters should ideally be face to face when someone is having the procedures, with a trained and regulated practitioner.

Rather surprisingly, there is no age restriction on cosmetic procedures, and I argue that we should have one. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics recommended that children under 18 should not be able to have these procedures unless there was an overriding medical reason for them to do so. As a comparison, the law as it stands in England is that if someone wants to use a sunbed, they must be over 18. I mentioned unregulated vets earlier; we would not consider taking a valued pet to an unregulated vet to have an injection, so why would anyone let, for example, their 16-year-old daughter have someone unregulated inject something potentially poisonous into her face? I invite the Government to consider age restrictions.

The other point I will make is about the content of many dermal fillers. There is a total lack of regulation on the content—that is, the chemical ingredients. According to the British College of Aesthetic Medicine, there are more than 60 dermal fillers available in the UK market alone. It should shock us that we often do not know the content of those fillers and what poisons they may well contain that might have a negative impact on someone's body.

I believe that urgent regulation is required to protect consumers—our constituents. The steps that the Minister and her Department have taken today are very welcome indeed, but we must do more. I look forward to the Minister's comments, because I am confident that she is looking into this.

John McNally: People who put their life savings into investing in their businesses need reassurance that their investment is protected and not undermined by poorly-trained practitioners, because we all make assumptions—seemingly unfounded ones—that those businesses all operate legally and above board. I must bring to the attention of hon. Members the fact that I have met with the insurance companies, which are deeply concerned about the lack of regulation in this particular business. I wonder whether the Minister will comment on how businesses could be better insured and how we could make this a viable business that would not be undermined by other people.

Alberto Costa: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, because this goes to the heart of what professional indemnity insurance is. One of the principal points of regulation is that a consumer knows that, if the professional is negligent, as people often are—people make mistakes—they will not be suing a man or woman of straw; that professional will have professional indemnity insurance behind them. That is the right form of protection in our society, in addition to qualifications and training.

I am pleased to champion this issue, along with the hon. Members present. I once again encourage the Government to continue doing the right thing, and to lead us to a situation in which we have a properly functioning and regulated beauty industry.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon during Mental Health Awareness Week, for which the theme is body image, so it is particularly appropriate that we are discussing this issue again, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for—I can never remember.

Alberto Costa: South Leicestershire.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Thanks very much—my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). I am pleased that the all-party parliamentary group has been established since we last debated the issue in this place, and I thank the hon. Member for Swansea West—

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): East.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris)—I never know my east from my west—and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for joining that group. It is great to have the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) here, who obviously takes a keen interest in these matters.

Carolyn Harris: I apologise, Mr Owen; I tried to get here earlier. May I first congratulate the Department on today's announcement? Our all-party parliamentary group's inquiry is the first to assess the current regulation of non-surgical cosmetic procedures and its adequacy in ensuring customer safety. I offer the Minister the opportunity to come and to talk to us and hear the inquiry's findings.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I accept that invitation most gratefully, and I look forward to hearing the conclusions. The time is right for us to take action on this, and I am grateful for the support of Members from across the House in wanting to do that and to do the right thing, with the intention of protecting consumers, which is obviously central to us, but also ensuring a system of regulation that is proportionate for the industry. We need to make sure that we balance both of those.

We have not really given the industry enough attention, given the speed with which it has grown. We increasingly see examples of consumers receiving poor treatment; my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire referred to his constituent, to whom I am grateful for sharing her story. We need to make everyone much more aware of the risk because, as he says, people think it is just like having a haircut; it is becoming extremely normal to have what are poisons injected into the face.
We need to make sure that everyone is aware of the risk before they undertake such a procedure, so that they can make an informed judgment.

**John Mc Nally:** I am not taking exception to the idea of it being just like having a haircut, but I have been involved in the business of hair salons for more than 50 years and have run salons, and it is not just like having a haircut. There is a similarity in terms of the investment put into any business, which is long term in some cases. When somebody comes along who has not properly trained and has little knowledge, there will be consequences of what they practise. In my all-party parliamentary group’s inquiries, we have come across modern-day slavery, trafficking, money laundering and all sorts of things, which just builds the case for a mandatory regulatory framework.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, because when we talk about these examples, there is a danger that people can apply that prejudice to the entire industry. It is in the interests of everyone involved in this industry to welcome regulation, not least to celebrate the professionalism of what they do. There are some very reputable practitioners out there who are not actually in the medical industry. For example, semi-permanent make-up—a surgical procedure that does not involve any invasion—clearly does not require as strident regulation as what we are talking about with injectables, but it is the same industry, and we need to ensure an adequate registration system.

**Judith Cummins:** I very much welcome the Minister’s announcement today. On training and regulation for beauticians—non-medical people who constitute around 50,000 jobs in the UK economy—there is huge appetite and support within the industry for proper and appropriate regulation, and there is recognition of the urgent need for that. However, there are no regulated qualifications available for non-medical practitioners for injectables at the moment. Going forward, does the Minister think there will be some kind of progression route for beauticians to go into this kind of industry, so that we can guarantee proper standards for the consumer?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The hon. Lady is right, and I am grateful for the spirit in which she makes her comments. Anyone who establishes themselves in business as a beautician wants to deliver a good service, has pride in what they do and would not want to be accused of doing anything unsafe.

My first focus of activity is those organisations that train people in these procedures, because I can see a situation in which a beautician will have paid thousands of pounds to go on a course and will then think that they are qualified, but they might not be. That is where we need to bring the focus of regulation in the first instance, so that when somebody proudly displays their certificates, consumers can have some guarantee that they are legitimate. I welcome the opportunity to air these issues with the all-party parliamentary group as we move this system of regulation forward.

Sadly, we only have 30 minutes for this debate, so I doubt whether I will be able to get through as much as I would wish, but I will do my best. I am grateful for the interest of all Members here. We will continue this discussion. It is worth saying that Botox treatments and dermal fillers are increasing and, along with laser hair removal, now represent nine out of 10 non-surgical treatments performed in the UK. This is a major area of risk.

Hon. Members have referenced the campaign that we launched today. Clearly, consumers will be the best defenders of their own interest, but we must make sure that they have access to appropriate information with which to do so; we need to do much more to inform people about the risk. Just as in my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire’s example of his constituent, I am quite sure that many people who have had fillers—who have gone to have their lips done, like they do—would have no idea that there is a risk of their artery being injected with poison. We need to make sure that consumers are much more aware of that, which is why we are doing so much more in the next six weeks to try to raise public awareness.

We will focus on targeting our messages to women aged 18 to 34, on whom the majority of the treatments are undertaken. I am pleased that we are working with Bauer Media, which publishes Grazia, Closer and Heat, which I hope will be appropriate vehicles to reach that audience. We will make sure that the NHS information is kept up to date and remains a meaningful resource for consumers.

**Jim Shannon:** Would the Minister consider making it so that under-18s could not have this treatment?

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Minister, you have less than two minutes.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes, absolutely. I am committed to bringing forward legislation to do that at the earliest possible opportunity. I would really like to engage with the all-party parliamentary group to see what other conclusions they can bring forward quickly, so that we can make use of that legislation, to strengthen the opportunities to have a meaningful register, and indeed to look at the whole issue of insurance and what we should expect everyone involved in this to do.

I am open to debate, and I am absolutely committed to bringing the age restriction in line with things like tattoos and sunbeds. Frankly, it is ridiculous that there is an age limit for getting on a sunbed but anybody can have poison injected into their face. That is clearly ridiculous, and we need to tackle it.

We will encourage consumers to look at choosing a reputable practitioner and to properly interrogate the person doing the procedure, asking them about the risks. I am pleased that Superdrug, which has moved into this field, is having pre-screening conversations with clients and giving them cooling-off time before embarking on the treatment. I think that is really good practice and is something we could encourage throughout the industry, not least because it encourages practitioners to think about how they engage with their consumers and to properly understand the risks themselves.

We are moving into a new period of regulation of dermal fillers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire is quite right that they are completely unregulated at present, but they will become regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency,¹ which will put them on a similar footing to

¹[Official Report, 12 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 3MC.]
Botox and will mean that they need to be given by the prescriber. He is right to highlight the risk of people being able to delegate that responsibility for prescribing, and again we should look at legislating on that. Clearly we could also ask the regulators of medics to look at that, because, frankly, delegating the responsibility for prescribing does not really seem consistent with patient safety. We need to look at that.

I am fast running out of seconds, so I will conclude by thanking my hon. Friend and all hon. Members for their interest in this subject. I hope that we all continue talking about this, so that we can take action quickly. This is massive area of risk for consumers and we need to take action to fix it.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to both the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and the Minister for taking so many interventions.

Question put and agreed to.
were introduced; they related to different aspects of automatism. Automatism can be used in relation not just to road deaths and road accidents, but to rape and murder. The most familiar case of that is when people defend their action of rape or murder by saying that it was automatism; they were sleepwalking and were not responsible for their actions.

Today, I want to tackle this issue, because I believe that there is an injustice out there and I am speaking for the victims who can no longer speak. I have become familiar with many high-profile cases in which automatism has been used as a legal defence to avoid criminal prosecution, particularly in relation to incidents that occur on the roads, although concerns surrounding the use of automatism as a defence are, as I have said, not exclusive to driving offences.

Automatism is a common-law defence used by defendants in court. There are numerous definitions, which makes defining this state difficult, but I will try. An article in the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* describes legal automatism as “a state of involuntariness” and says that it “exonerates the individual because the criminal justice system only punishes those acting voluntarily.”

Automatism is broadly divided into two types: sane automatism and insane automatism. “Sane” relates to cases of sleepwalking, fainting and hypoglycaemic attack, whereas “insane” relates to schizophrenia and diseases of the mind.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I heard about this defence quite a long time ago, in 2002, because of the very high-profile case of Peter Buck, the guitarist in the rock group R.E.M. He was charged for air rage on a BA flight and he did not deny his behaviour, but he claimed that a zolpidem sleeping pill reacted violently with alcohol, turning him into a non-insane automaton—you could say that he was acting “Automatically against the People”. Does my hon. Friend think that in that sort of case, in which there is no injury, automatism is a valid defence?

Mr Sheerman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was going to mention the R.E.M. case, which, as he says, is a very famous one. Can I come back to that? He is absolutely right, and I will come back to it in a moment.

The requirements of a defence of non-insane automatism—I am not dealing with insane automatism—are that, first, there must exist an involuntary action arising from an external source or reflex action; secondly, the action must be completely involuntary; and thirdly, the automatism must not be self-induced. Some academic literature states that the automatism defence is increasingly being used, but the problem is that no statistics are kept on how often the automatism defence is pleaded or succeeds. The word I hear from the justice system more broadly is when a senior policeman or policewoman comes up to me and says, “Look, we’re in real difficulties prosecuting here, because the defendant is going to use automatism. It’s going to be very, very difficult, because the CPS will be very reluctant to bring the prosecution.”

In a sense, what I am trying to bring to the public gaze today is this question: why do we not know how many cases are not proceeded with because the Crown Prosecution Service thinks that it is all too difficult, that the chances of getting a conviction are not good with a clever lawyer using automatism as the reason for the defendant’s behaviour?

I want to give a couple of examples. In 2014, there was the terrible accident in Glasgow involving a council-owned waste lorry that collided with pedestrians in the city centre, killing six people and injuring 15 others. The driver said that he had passed out at the wheel, and he was not prosecuted. Glasgow sheriff court was told that the driver had passed out at the wheel and heard evidence regarding his alleged failure to disclose a history of dizziness and blackouts in job applications and when renewing his licence.

Nicky Selby-Short, a solicitor in Access Legal’s specialist personal injury team, comments:

“There may be occasions when such a defence is entirely justified, but claiming automatism is likely to continue to be used by defendants since it is a good tactic; however, it is accepted it will leave innocent claimants with no award whatsoever for what are often very serious injuries” and, of course, death.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is of course raising a really important issue, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that to make out this defence, the burden is on the defendant to advance evidence, which may be in the form of medical evidence. It would be quite wrong to give the impression that somehow a defendant could simply say, “I’m invoking non-insane automatism,” and get off scot-free. The burden is on him to prove it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr Sheerman: Absolutely, I agree with that, but as I make my case, I think the hon. Gentleman will understand why I am worried about what happens at the moment.

The second case I want to mention is R v. Burton in 2007. An elderly motorist killed a married couple in a high-speed crash and was controversially cleared of all blame by a judge, after claiming that he may have been in a state of automatism at the time. Experts said that retired businessman Arnold Burton may not have known what he was doing when he smashed head-on into the couple’s car, while doing at least 76 mph in a 30-mile speed limit in his Jaguar X-Type.

Leeds Crown court was told that the 89-year-old, whose father founded the Burton clothing empire, could have been suffering from a lack of blood to the brain. Prosecutors decided to offer no evidence on two charges of causing death by dangerous driving after psychiatrists concluded that Mr Burton might not have been aware at the time. The recorder of Leeds, Judge Norman Jones, said that the elderly motorist was “driving automatically” and that his “brain was not in control of his body” when the crash happened.

In Glasgow, in 2010, two little girls were killed while Christmas shopping by a Range Rover that hit them on the pavement. The charges against the driver were dropped, because he suffered a loss of consciousness, owing to an undiagnosed medical condition.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for generously giving way. Where a road accident leads to someone losing a life, one’s heart goes out to the victims
and those who are left behind. However, it is important that one injustice is not replaced by another injustice. If it really is the case that that individual was effectively unconscious, surely the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that he should be criminally culpable none the less. It may be that he should not have his driving licence, but that is another issue. If he is truly unconscious, surely he is not criminally liable.

Mr Sheerman: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. I believe in evidence-based policy. We have a great deficiency in the transport safety area that I keep nagging the Government about. In Sweden, every time there is a fatality on the roads, there is a thorough investigation. That does not happen in the United Kingdom. There is no highly skilled investigation of an accident involving a death. There is a real problem finding out what really happened.

I will whisk through the prominent case that highlights how automatism might be used too broadly. It involves Peter Buck from the band R.E.M., who was acquitted of charges of two counts of common assault and one count of criminal damage while being drunk on a plane. There was a good defence. What distinguished Mr Buck’s case from others of this nature was that he raised the defence of automatism in a Court of Appeal, which described non-insane automatism as “malfunctioning of the mind of transitory effect caused by the application to the body of some external factor such as violence, drugs, including anaesthetics, alcohol and hypnotic influences”.

Mr Buck sought to establish that the commission of the offences he was charged with lacked a mental element due to a transitory effect caused by the external factor of red wine combined with sleeping tablets.

However, a defendant cannot simply absolve himself of all responsibility for his actions by blaming pills and alcohol. A self-induced incapacity will not excrcise; nor will one that could reasonably have been foreseen, such as automatism, once such a defence has been established—this is what legal experts tell me—it falls on the prosecution to disprove the evidence of automatism beyond reasonable doubt. I am not trying to turn the justice system upside down: I am merely shining a light on the increasing use of automatism as a defence.

Forms of automatism have also been used to defend people who have been accused of rape. Sexsomnia is being used internationally. In 2007, in the UK a man was let off for raping a 15-year-old because he claimed sexsomnia. Let us remember that, according to a 2002 London Metropolitan University study, just 6% of cases result in conviction, because of loopholes in the law such as automatism.

Dr Cosmo Hallström, a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said:

“People do sleep walk and they do strange things in their sleep, but it is usually no more complex than grinding of the teeth or smacking the lips—at most they may get up and make a cup of tea. I would think it was extremely difficult to perform such a complex manoeuvre as having sexual intercourse while asleep—especially if the other person is unwilling.”

Harry Cohen spoke on this in the House of Commons only 11 years ago:

“Anybody up in court on a rape charge could get a few friends and family to claim that he sleepwalks, and he will almost certainly get off.”—[Official Report, 15 October 2008; Vol. 480, c. 801.]

Harry Cohen introduced the Rape (Defences) Bill in 2008 to address this. That Bill sought to prohibit the use of a defence of sleepwalking or non-insane automatism in proceedings relating to the offence of rape.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous with his time. We all want to see more people who are guilty of rape convicted. We all agree that the statistics are shocking. However, on the example that he gave, if the prosecution were able to call evidence to suggest that what was being posited—namely that the defendant raped through non-insane automatism—was a complete fiction and entirely implausible, a jury should have little difficulty giving that defence short shrift and finding the defendant guilty. Does he agree that if it is a bad defence, the prosecution can call evidence to expose it as such?

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is right, but I am trying to get the balance right. There are so few successful prosecutions for rape and there is an increasing tendency worldwide to use this as a reason why the person—usually a man—was unable to know what they were doing.

In 2008, another good former comrade—sorry, colleague—of ours, Dr Brian Iddon introduced the Road Traffic (Accident Compensation) Bill, which sought to provide no-fault compensation for personal injury in road traffic accidents where liability cannot be established. This is the nub of the matter. However many people are killed or injured in an accident involving automatism, there is no compensation. How can that be just? In such cases, the victim is left injured or killed, but with no compensation for the family. Surely, the Minister would agree that it is time to consider introducing a no-fault compensation system in this area, as is used in other countries such as New Zealand.

We are coming to the end of the story. In 2013 the Law Commission undertook a review and produced a discussion paper called “Criminal Liability: Insanity and Automatism”. It produced a range of recommendations for reform of this defence. I hope that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who intervened on me two or three times, will be able to hear this, because it is germane to his interventions. Much of the report focused on the need for modernisation and reform of the law around insane automatism or the insanity defence. It recommended that the arcane criminal law be reformed by replacing it with the new defence of “not criminally responsible by reason of recognised medical condition”.

However, it also proposed to abolish the less clearly defined common law defence of automatism in favour of a reformed automatism defence that was clearer and narrower in scope. To the best of my knowledge, the Government have not since acted on those recommendations. I ask the Minister what actions, if any, the Government have taken in relation to clearing
up the legal problems identified by the Law Commission. Will the Government undertake to enact any of the proposed reforms recommended by the Law Commission?

This is about victims and justice. What is really going on in the undisclosed statistics from the Crown Prosecution Service? What is going on in the desperately underfunded justice system that we operate in this country? I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. How many more miscarriages of justice will happen, not because of ill-will or badly motivated, wicked people, but because of a lack of resources, investment and personnel?

There is no scheme in the UK to compensate victims of genuine automatism. A person who is injured through no fault of their own has no opportunity for compensation for what are often serious injuries or death. Sometimes an insurance company makes an ex gratia payment to an injured party, but that is rare. As it stands, the law offers no protection to the often entirely blameless victims of the automatism defence.

It is not surprising that this effective get-out-of-jail-free card is being used more frequently by defendants. Countries that operate no-fault compensation schemes include France—it has implemented a no-fault standard for serious and unforeseen medical injuries, and a fault standard—and New Zealand, which has also put in place a no-fault compensation scheme with the broadest eligibility criteria; the no-fault standard is applicable to any unexpected treatment injury.

On the Crown Prosecution Service and the police, an article in the International Journal of Law and Psychiatry notes that in a criminal trial, it can be difficult to decide whether to hold responsible a defendant who did the act but claims that their mental state was abnormal because of the lack of objective evidence. There is no brain scan or blood test to measure responsibility. The best witness to what was in the defendant’s mind is usually the defendant, who obviously has an interest in what the court decides.

I have always said that we need good evidence-based policy, but we lack the evidence and statistics about how often automatism is evoked as a legal defence. As I talk to people in the police and the Crown Prosecution Service up and down the country, there is a suspicion in my mind that the defence is increasingly becoming a way for well-heeled people who can get the right solicitor to get off dreadful crimes on the road. We know that there is a group of solicitors who can find some defence to get rock stars or people in the public eye off.

Despite many high-profile cases, we do not know how often this occurs. How many cases are not being brought to trial because prosecutors have lost confidence that they can challenge the evidence? How aware are the police, while they are investigating a case, about people invoking automatism? We need evidence to evaluate whether clever lawyers are using the defence to get people off.

This is about justice for people who can no longer fight their own corner. This Chamber is the right environment for this debate, and I hope I have made a coherent case.

4.53 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on bringing this interesting and important issue to the Chamber, and on the eloquent and passionate way that he explained the background. I also pay tribute to him for his work on road safety over the years.

I, too, apologise in advance to any criminal lawyers or criminal law academics who are watching the debate, as I am about to blunder into it with a few thoughts. In years gone by, I was a lawyer, for my sins, but not a criminal lawyer, so I am somewhat reluctant to wade in.

The debate allows us to consider whether the principles behind the defence of automatism are right and to ask whether there is evidence for the term being too broadly defined so there have been unjust acquittals or for it being too narrowly drawn so people have been convicted who should not have been. As has been explained, in simplified terms, the defence of automatism involves the defendant showing that his conduct was involuntary, so he cannot be held criminally liable for it.

Criminal law in England and Wales and in Scotland recognises versions of automatism. That has been developed case by case under common law. Its terminology and operation, in certain circumstances, can look a little strange and dated. There are differences, but both jurisdictions—of England and Wales and of Scotland—have historically made distinctions between, on the one hand, automatism caused by so-called internal factors, which can justify a plea of insanity, although that has changed a bit in Scotland recently, and, on the other, automatism caused by external factors where the defendant was not at fault for inducing that state.

The key point is that, as a broad principle—I do not think the hon. Gentleman suggested otherwise—the idea that someone cannot be criminally responsible for involuntary acts must be right. Convicting a person for involuntary acts would not serve the purposes of the criminal justice system. We cannot rehabilitate someone who needs no rehabilitation, because they did not choose to do wrong, and we cannot deter people if they have no control over what they are doing. It is fundamentally wrong to punish people where there is no responsibility.

The question that has been posed today, however, is whether that is working in practice and whether it is being interpreted too broadly or narrowly. As with any criminal defence, there will be individual cases where some people—sometimes many people—question whether justice has properly been done one way or another. The hon. Gentleman highlighted some difficult and heartbreaking cases.

The hon. Gentleman also flagged up concerns that the defence has been increasingly relied on by criminal lawyers. I confess that I have not picked up on that, but he is obviously far more engaged in the issue than I am. I certainly agree, however, that it would be good to have greater transparency about it. I am interested to know whether the Minister is willing to try to see whether there is a better method to record how often the defence is being used or seems to be a barrier for the prosecution. We need to know what is happening either way.

On the whole, from what I understand, the balance of case law seems to suggest that the courts will usually take a pretty narrow view of the scope of the defence—the word “scepticism” has sometimes been used. As the hon. Gentleman said, several cases involve drivers, some of whom are diabetic drivers. I found the example of...
Broome v. Perkins in the textbooks, where the defendant, although in a hypoglycaemic state, was found guilty of driving without due care and attention, because from time to time he apparently exercised conscious control of his car by veering away from other vehicles to avoid a collision, braking violently and so on. In the Court of Appeal, it was said that the defendant would need to show that he was totally unable to control his actions owing to an unforeseen hypoglycaemic attack, that he could not reasonably have avoided the attack and that there was no advance warning of its onset.

In Scotland, the jury manual published by the Judicial Institute for Scotland also seems to be strict in setting out the requirements for defending externally caused automatism. It says that “the external factor must not be self-induced, that it must be one which the accused was not bound to foresee and that it must have resulted in a total alienation of reason amounting to a total loss which the accused was not bound to foresee and that it must have been... the external factor must not be self-induced, that it must be one which the accused was not bound to foresee and that it must have resulted in a total alienation of reason amounting to a total loss which the accused was not bound to foresee and that it must have been...”

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a real problem with medical evidence, if there is no charge, is that it is difficult for the victims ever to understand what the medical reason was? If there is no trial, there is no explanation of what kind of ill health caused the accident. The fact is that many drivers who are not charged continue to drive and may have the same medical condition. That is a real problem. In Scotland, however, there are more advanced laws on many of these issues than we have.

Stuart C. McDonald: I would like to think so, but I am not absolutely convinced.

Mr Sheerman: Alcohol.

Stuart C. McDonald: Certainly, on alcohol, we have taken the step to reduce the limit up to which people can drive to virtually nothing.

As I say, there has to be transparency. I am not aware that this has caused a problem for the prosecution services, but I am now alive to those concerns and I will perhaps try to establish whether that is the case. In some examples, however, when the burden is on the defendant to prove the case, I am not sure that it would stop a prosecution in the first place—the prosecution would proceed and the issues would come out afterwards. I do not have an easy answer, however, and this is something that I definitely need to look into.

Also, when we look at all these things in the round, the prosecution service has to be aware of what other action needs to be taken to stop such things happening again, even if there is not a prosecution subsequent to an accident of the sort that we have been talking about. There are other disposals or actions available, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, in relation to making sure that that person no longer drives, for example. However, we need reassurance that that is definitely happening.

In short, the point that I was making there was that what the courts have been looking for is “a total destruction of voluntary control”, to quote one case. The hon. Member for Huddersfield has rightly flagged up a number of other areas of controversy. This issue is not just about driving; there have been a number of cases where the defence of sleepwalking has been used in relation to accusations of sexual offences. However, the principle remains that the defence of automatism must be available if the evidence is there to justify it.

Should there be reform at all? In 2010 in Scotland, the internal-cause “insanity” defence was replaced by a mental disorder defence. This requires that an accused, at the time of the conduct constituting a crime, must have been “unable by reason of mental disorder to appreciate the nature or wrongfulness of the conduct.”

Then there is a detailed definition of “mental disorder”. As I understand it, that reform has been broadly welcomed. That said, it is only fair to point out that some have criticised the Scottish Law Commission’s report because it ignored “external-cause” automatism, thereby arguably missing the opportunity to ensure that the law here is coherent and comprehensive in relation to what are really two closely related and even overlapping defences.

Of course, the hon. Gentleman referred to the Law Commission in England and Wales, and its report, which I think was done in 2013, when it carried out a similar review. It looked at both types of automatism defence and recommended a new statutory “recognised medical condition” defence, which I think is along the same lines as the Scottish defence. However, it also went for a new and more tightly drawn statutory automatism offence. I also understand that, so far, the Government here have decided not to act on that advice. They might have good reasons for that, but it is obviously up to the Minister to set them out today.

From my point of view, there may well be good reasons for looking at the two sides of automatism together, because it makes a significant difference which is considered, in terms of where the burden of proof lies and what disposals are available to a court if the defence is made out.

I do not come to any fixed conclusion on that, but on the whole I will just say finally that we need defences of this nature to be available to ensure that justice is done. For the most part, the current system seems to be working in practice and the courts have been justifiably restrictive in interpreting the scope of these defences. There will be controversial criminal verdicts—that does not necessarily mean that there is a fundamental injustice in the nature of these defences—but I absolutely take on board what the hon. Gentleman has said today about there being some concern that automatism is being increasingly relied on. That should be looked at. We need more transparency about what is going on—

Mr Sheerman: Victims.

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely—the victims need to know what is happening in a particular case and they also need a full explanation of why any prosecution does not go ahead, including the nature of any medical evidence, if that is at all possible.
I am absolutely alive to arguments for improvement and reform. The hon. Gentleman also made some interesting comments about a compensation scheme. I have not considered that in advance of the debate, but I will go away and consider it too.

I thank the hon. Gentleman again for securing this debate. It has been very interesting and thought provoking, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

5.2 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mr. Owen. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald); I congratulate him on his speech.

I also refer at the outset to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a non-practising barrister now at Civitas Law in Cardiff. I was a practising barrister for a number of years before entering the House, but I practised in criminal law only for a few years at the start of my career at the Bar.

I also warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) on his opening speech and on bringing this matter before the House. Although they are no longer in their places, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for their contributions to the debate.

I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield about the utility of Westminster Hall, particularly for a debate on an issue such as this, which is very important but none the less quite technical in terms of how we deal with it. I share my hon. Friend’s passion for road safety, and he spoke movingly of a knock on the door bringing extremely bad news about a close family member.

My hon. Friend is also entirely right to say that the automatism defence is little understood, and I think that it is indicative that it has not even been mentioned in Hansard since 2008, which shows how long this House and this Parliament have gone without considering it.

On the issue of statistics, in the past I have argued about statistics in relation to a number of different offences. It is clearly an issue for the Crown Prosecution Service, superintended of course by the Law Officers, to determine what statistics are collected, when they are collected and for which particular offences. Particularly in cases where there are clearly victims who will be extraordinarily affected by the events, it is important that it is transparent as to what has happened at each stage of the process. If something does not reach prosecution in the first place, why does it not reach prosecution? There should be a full explanation. If the matter is discontinued at some stage between charge and trial, why is that? If there is a not guilty verdict in the end, why has that happened? Communication to victims throughout the process is vital.

Mr. Sheerman: On that point, I said that in Sweden there is an absolutely high-class specialist unit that examines every death on the road, whereas in England and Wales the fact is that there is only very patchy expertise when it comes to investigating such a death. A defence of automatism is quite an unusual thing to happen in a police area and the competences required to investigate it are very specific indeed. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given some of the recent cuts in the police of this country, that aspect of the investigative side of affairs has been badly hit?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the issue of cuts in police officers affecting things right across the board. Clearly, there are different levels of investigation. For example, if there is an injury in a road traffic accident, that triggers a certain level of investigation, and similarly if there is a death. However, in a sense, the fact that we do not have a body equivalent to the one in Sweden underlines the point that I am making about the need for transparency throughout the process.

By the way, I will also add, regarding the decisions made by prosecutors, that every prosecutor has to apply the code for Crown prosecutors. First, is there a realistic prospect of conviction? Secondly, is it in the public interest to bring a prosecution? If that process is not happening, that needs to be brought to light, and the superintendence by the Law Officers is absolutely vital to ensure that, right through the system, that process is happening. If there is anywhere where it is not happening, that should not be the case.

While I am on the subject of the Crown Prosecution Service, I will refer to the sleepwalking cases that my hon. Friend mentioned. The CPS has recently issued legal guidance about the sleepwalking cases, which should be available to everyone involved in the area, including the prosecutors, on how to challenge the automatism defence appropriately before a judge, if it is raised. If the defence uses expert evidence, which it is likely to, the CPS says this to its prosecuting lawyers:

“Such evidence should always be analysed by an expert for the prosecution.”

That is what we would expect to happen. Indeed, as long ago as 1958, Mr Justice Devlin, in the case of Hill v. Baxter, said:

“I do not doubt that there are genuine cases of automatism, but I do not see how the layman can safely attempt, without the help of some medical or scientific evidence, to distinguish the genuine from the fraudulent.”

We would expect there to be experts on both sides in such a case that came before the criminal courts, and for many of the reasons that my hon. Friend outlined during his fine speech that is how it should be, and I would hope to see that in the criminal courts.

My hon. Friend also referred to the comments of the Law Commission on this issue, and I will come on to them with the Minister. Actually, the Law Commission’s document was very useful, in terms of the need for reform in this area. Looking at the defence of insanity—I appreciate that there is a distinction between non-insane and insane automatism, and I will come to that in a moment—in essence, it goes back to 1843. Frankly, it has not changed much since then, which is a real issue.

The Law Commission accepted the principle of the automatism defence, but it made a substantial number of criticisms of it, regarding what has to be done to bring it up to date and make it fit for the modern day. The Law Commission said:

“We take the view that it is unjust to hold people criminally responsible when they could not have avoided committing the alleged crime, through no fault of their own. Put another way, a person should be exempted from criminal responsibility if he or she totally lacked capacity to conform to the relevant law.”
Of course, that excludes situations where the automatism is self-induced, or situations in which, given what someone did, it was foreseeable that they could end up in a particular state. It excludes that, and so it should, because the defence is very narrow in what it refers to.

The Law Commission has made many important criticisms of the law as it stands. First is the criticism that it is technically deficient. We are distinguishing between the mental and physical elements of the crime, but that is not always possible. It is not easy to see possessing something that is illegal to possess purely as an act; there must be the intent to hold on to it, and it is not easy to make that distinction. Secondly, has the law really kept up with developments in medicine, psychology and psychiatry in how we classify mental illness? No, it has not. It has not changed substantially for more than 150 years. Bizarrely as well, this is not available in magistrates court. Why should it be that the defence is applicable in our Crown courts but not in magistrates? That is clearly a loophole that needs to be dealt with.

There is an argument that defendants can find themselves acquitted but stigmatised because of the word “insanity”, which is still used as it is central to the defence. In addition, and as was at the heart of my hon. Friend’s speech, how does the defence sit with the victim’s human rights? Like everyone else, the victim in these cases is entitled to the right to life—article 2 of the Human Rights Act 1998—and where there has been a tragic death that article has been clearly violated.

There is also article 3 on inhuman and degrading treatment, and article 8 on the right to a private life. We really must ensure that the defence, as it is framed today with appropriate safeguards, is compatible with the victim’s human rights. One can understand the situation in the road traffic incidents described by my hon. Friend, where either automatism has ended up, it seems, with prosecutors not seeing the case as passing the evidence test or something has happened further down the line, with victims not being aware of why that had happened. That is a real issue.

Mr Sheerman: May I make a cynical point? A road traffic academic expert pointed out to me that it is ironic that the number of cases in which people plead automatism has risen almost exactly in parallel with the use of mobile phones in cars.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: There may well be a number of reasons for that; we may simply have more offences. However, I entirely take on board my hon. Friend’s point, and it would indeed reinforce the need for an understanding and an awareness of the defence and why certain cases are not being proceeded with or are not successful.

The other point I make to the Minister is about Parliament as it is at the moment. The Law Commission has papers about reform of the law—not just on automatism, but in many other areas too—that would not be partisan and would be likely to command widespread support. We have not had a vote in Parliament for the past month, so it seems that at this point in our parliamentary history, and when the Law Commission has made recommendations, there is room in the timetable for laws to be introduced. If this situation of so little substantive business continues, real thought ought to be given in Government to at least trying to use the time productively on matters that, while perhaps not partisan, would make a big difference to the lives of our constituents.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that he might want to allow the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I suspect I will, Mr Owen. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this debate on automatism as a legal defence. I am conscious of his work in this area and across a range of aspects of the operation of the law, particularly regarding the impact on victims. I know that he has taken a particular interest in a number of tragic cases. Although he will appreciate that I cannot comment on individual cases, especially where charging decisions are concerned, I know his work in the area.

Given the limited examples of the use of automatism as a defence, it might be worth elaborating a little, as other hon. Members have, on the current law and its operation. I will also seek to share the Government’s general approach to reform of the law in this area, and the Law Commission’s.

Generally, automatism is a defence to a criminal charge where the defendant’s consciousness was so impaired that he or she was acting in a state of physical involuntariness. It is more than not intending something to happen; it is not being aware of those actions. There are two distinct types of automatism. First, there is insane automatism, which stems from an internal cause or disease of the mind. Where this occurs, the proper verdict is not guilty by reason of insanity. Secondly, there is sane or non-insane automatism, which stems from a cause other than a disease of the mind, an external cause that leads to a loss of control. Where this occurs, the proper verdict is not guilty. The hon. Member for Huddersfield suggested, and I think I am quoting him accurately, that there was an increasing tendency by clever lawyers to seek to use this defence, but I have to say that there is no evidence of that. He himself mentioned the stats, and this comes back to the statistical point, which I will touch on shortly. As always, the hon. Gentleman makes his point forcefully, to highlight the issue that he believes is behind this.

Mr Sheerman: How do we know how many times the Crown Prosecution Service does not prosecute because it thinks it will not be able to get a conviction because of the use of automatism?

Edward Argar: I will come back shortly to the two tests that the shadow Solicitor General mentioned. On the statistics point, it appears that automatism is rarely used as a successful defence, and that sane automatism, which is what most people assume that to be, is extremely rare because it is very hard to prove. However, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) also made the point about the statistics. It is a matter for the CPS, but we can take back to that service and to other agencies the question of examining whether there are better ways to identify
trends and the statistical evidence bases underlying them. I do not have an answer now, but that is something we can take away and look into.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** This is an issue that I have raised before in other contexts. Sometimes we are told by the CPS that it has to look through the file of each case to pick up certain data, but in such cases, particularly where there are deaths, as there might be in a road traffic case, it would be useful to look at what data is collected and reviewed. I hope that the Minister will pass that on to the law officers who superintend the CPS.

**Edward Argar:** I am happy to do that, not least because in her previous ministerial role the now Solicitor General would have been taking this debate. I am sure that having prepared for it in advance, as she usually did, she will be well aware of the issue, and I am happy to raise it with her.

The distinction between the two types of automatism is important for reasons other than the verdicts. In insane automatism, the burden of proof is on the defendant to show that he or she did not know the nature of the act committed. However, in the case of non-insane automatism, the burden remains on the prosecution to satisfy a jury beyond reasonable doubt that the defendant has not had a total loss of control and is, therefore, guilty of the offence.

To illustrate that further, there is the example of incidents that occur as the result of hypo or hyperglycaemia. If a defendant argues that the act was caused by the administration of insulin leading to hypoglycaemia, that is an external factor and the defendant will be acquitted unless the prosecution can show this to be untrue. However, if the defendant argues that the incident was due to diabetes causing excessive blood sugar hyperglycaemia, that would be an internal factor and the onus would be on the defendant to prove, on the balance of probabilities supported by medical evidence, that he or she was not guilty by reason of insanity.

The cause of automatism can understandably be confusing to many. I will give an example that is possibly a reflection of how the law is interpreted and the difference between what is, in legal terms, the interpretation and what anyone else might read it as. For example, epilepsy is a disease of the mind. When an epileptic seizure results in an assault, for instance, a successful defence would be an insanity verdict. Of course, most people would not consider that an epileptic seizure amounted to insanity, but that is how the law would be interpreted in a narrow, legal context.

Acts committed while suffering from concussion, sleepwalking—which we have touched on—amnesia, and even post-traumatic stress disorder may amount to an automatism defence. As alluded to earlier, such cases rely heavily on medical evidence as to the nature and causes of the loss of control. Perhaps the most famous illustration of automatism was in the context of an example given in one of the leading cases, Hill v. Baxter in 1958—that of a driver who causes an accident after being stung in their cab by a swarm of bees.

I will cover two final points before ending my survey of the current law and moving on to the future. I know that the hon. Member for Huddersfield has a particular interest in driving offences in the context of this debate, although his interest goes wider than that. Automatism is a defence even against strict liability offences; I mention that because although that defence occurs infrequently, it is most commonly reported in relation to driving offences. Significantly, that defence applies even when the offence does not require intent, such as with dangerous driving.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and others have highlighted, when automatism arises from prior fault or voluntary conduct, that usually—but not exclusively—means that the defendant was taking illegal drugs, or that alcohol was involved, for example. When a person is taking substances other than in accordance with medical direction, and the crime is one of basic intent such as an assault, the defence should fail if the substance taken is known to cause aggression or the consequences that caused the offence. It is not a defence to be completely out of it on drugs or due to alcohol, and as a result commit an offence, however unknowingly. Those questions, though, will often be left to the jury or to magistrates. It is worth stressing that the defence is much more narrowly drawn than many people might imagine.

Let me turn again to why the defence exists and briefly touch on the Scottish situation, which the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East alluded to. I understand that in Scotland the context is different, in that an automatism plea is treated as a denial of mens rea. In other words, if acting as an automaton, a person lacks the essential mental element of a crime and as a result should be acquitted of an offence. However, the Scottish courts have clarified that, for the defence of automatism to succeed, there must be a total alienation of reason that is caused by an external factor that was not self-induced or foreseeable. The internal versus external distinction therefore applies as a test in Scotland as it does in England, albeit in a slightly different form, and the defence will also fail if the defendant’s state is self-induced. Although the test of what amounts to insanity is different in Scotland from that in the jurisdiction of England and Wales, the defence—although it takes a slightly different approach—is none the less very similar in its application and consequences for defendants.

As I believe all who have spoken today have also said, I do not think that anyone would contend that a person who commits an act because of loss of control and through no fault of their own should be held liable for that offence. In such cases, it is also unlikely to be in the public interest to prosecute, as a conviction would not be secured. If there is doubt about whether the defendant contributed to their loss of control, then those questions may be tested in court. Of course, it is very difficult for innocent victims of these acts, who may themselves be injured or bereaved as a result of them, to accept that in law no one is to blame. It is particularly difficult for families of those who are killed, again through no fault of their own, by a person who was not in control of their actions. However, it remains unjust to punish someone for something they genuinely had no control over.

As was rightly highlighted by the shadow Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the code for Crown prosecutors is clear about its dual test. The public interest, and the evidence and likelihood of securing a conviction, are the tests
that Crown prosecutors will consider when assessing whether a defence is likely to undermine one or other of those factors. In that context, the hon. Member for Huddersfield mentioned transparency, as did the hon. Member for Torfaen. I think both will be aware that our system seeks to make the decision to prosecute as transparent as possible, including through communication with victims and those victims having the right to challenge and review the decision of the Crown Prosecution Service. In those cases, they will have information about what in those two tests caused the charge to not proceed.

Let me turn to the future, and the Law Commission’s report and proposals about this area. The lack of clarity on automatism to which the shadow Solicitor General referred, and the complexity of the outdated law on the connected defence of insanity, led the Law Commission to conduct a scoping study in 2012 and issue a discussion paper in the following year. The Law Commission did not, however, produce a full set of recommendations on automatism or complete its work with a final report. It rightly recognised that, in the context of its broader work on the law around insanity as a defence, this was an important but small part of a much broader piece. In taking that work forward, its focus was on the “unfitness to plead” aspect, and it is therefore yet to produce for consideration qualified legislative proposals on automatism.

Although the Law Commission’s comments and proposals in the 2013 discussion document would narrow the automatism defence slightly, as has been said, it would not remove it. The proposed reforms sought to simplify the law, replacing the common-law defence with a statutory one, and have one defence that, if made out, would lead to a not guilty verdict rather than the two possible verdicts previously mentioned. The Government considered the initial discussion paper’s proposals, but concluded that they would be a very limited reform to an already rarely used defence.

We have no current plans to bring forward legislative proposals. However, that does not mean that we have ruled out making changes to the law, including the wider and related law on insanity and fitness to plead; we keep that area under review. The shadow Solicitor General tempts me into saying that if the Ministry of Justice wishes to use any legislative time, that would be a good use of it. As a Department, we are productive in legislation; we have been, and I suspect we will continue to be.

To conclude, I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield on drawing the attention of the House to this issue. It is, as I think he said, the first time in 11 years that it has been properly debated, and I am sure there will be Members who are hearing about this issue today for the first time. I thank all who have contributed to the discussion of this complex topic, and I hope I have set out the law as it stands and where the Government stand on it. Finally, the hon. Gentleman knows that we already have a meeting scheduled on a different topic. I enjoy my meetings with him, and if he wishes to add specific questions about this aspect of law to our next meeting, I am happy to consider them.

5.27 pm

Mr Sheerman: I was lucky enough to have had my undergraduate and postgraduate education at the London School of Economics, whose motto is “To know the causes of things”. A few weeks ago, I had never heard of automatism at all. When it started cropping up in my consciousness, I thought, “This is the right place to bring it up, to see whether we can shed some light on it.” That is what we do well in Parliament.

I have been well served by the shadow Minister, the Minister, and those others who have contributed. We have shed some light on an important topic that many people knew little about, and I think this will go down as a historic debate. I hope we will come back to this issue, and that the improvements to the law that the Minister suggested might come about in the not too distant future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered automatism as a legal defence.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 May 2019

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

Marriage and Civil Partnership: Minimum Age

9.30 am

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank our new Minister for replying to this important debate and look forward to his response. The debate is about whether the House should consider increasing the legal age of marriage and civil partnership in the UK to 18.

Whatever our differences, I confidently predict that everyone in the House believes that it is sacrosanct that we protect our children; indeed, I suspect that all agree that we should be at the forefront of protecting children across the world. Laws in this country rightly consider young people differently until they are 18, and in the wider world the United Nations convention on the rights of the child relates to those under that age. It is clear that 16-year-olds are not adults. Some may outwardly appear more mature, but the reality is that they are still developing in both body and mind. In their teens, boys and girls are still guided by parents and teachers; after all, it was us who insisted that they need to be in full-time education until they are 18.

Could Members possibly imagine the 16-year-olds they know—their own children or grandchildren—getting married at that age? My granddaughter will be 15 later this year, and the idea of her getting married in just over a year’s time is mind-boggling, and she would agree. She will not be forced into marriage, but sadly that is not true of all young people, either in the UK or, just as importantly, across the globe, and specifically in countries where this country, and indeed this House, still hold significant sway.

The ability to marry under the age of 18 with the consent of parents is an important legal anomaly; I would argue that it is an absurdity. The reality of child marriage is extremely complex and wide-reaching.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong point. Has she looked at minimum ages around the world? There seems to be quite a large variation, particularly in places such as Africa, where it can be as low as 13 in some countries. Has she looked at comparative ages in the rest of Europe?

Mrs Latham: I have not actually looked at comparative ages in the rest of Europe. However, certainly in Africa and other developing countries, there is a wide range. We ask African countries and anywhere that we send development money to not to allow children to marry, and to set the minimum age at 18. They turn to us and ask why they should listen, because we allow children to marry. That is another very good reason why we should increase the age to 18.

The problem cuts across religions, regions and cultures, and it happens at home in the UK too, in the 21st century. The fact that it is possible to marry at 16 is, effectively, a means that child marriage is written into British law, which is held up as a guiding light in legal systems across the world. By not changing it, we give regimes an excuse to say, “What’s good for the British is good for us.”

I previously advocated changing our marriage law to increase the legal age to 18—with no exceptions—through a ten-minute rule Bill. Unfortunately, I had to withdraw it on Second Reading. Among the arguments I made in the House in support of the Bill were those relating to maturity levels, negative social implications, meeting international standards and helping to prevent forced marriages. I will reiterate all those arguments in more detail in this speech, to stress the importance of increasing the legal age of marriage in the UK.

Statistics on marriage among 16 and 17-year-olds are limited, but a limited dataset can be found on the Office for National Statistics website. It shows that 40 boys and 200 girls aged 16 to 17 married an opposite-sex partner in 2014, which is the most recent period for which we have data. Same-sex partners can now also marry at 16, but there is no recorded data on same-sex couples getting married at 16 or 17, which might be because there are so few cases, or none at all, of same-sex couples marrying below 18. The numbers might be relatively low, but the negative impact on the individuals involved in the marriage are large and wide-ranging.

Hon. Members should keep in mind the wider influence that our laws have. Increasing the marriage age in the UK to 18 has been gathering political momentum for some time. It should be noted that in 2017 Parliament considered the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill, which sought to raise the minimum age of consent to marriage or civil partnership to 18 and create an offence of causing a person under 18 to enter into a marriage or civil partnership. Unfortunately, the 2016-17 Session was prorogued and the Bill made no further progress. I attempted to reignite the process with my ten-minute rule Bill, but this failed on Second Reading.

Frustratingly, previous efforts to amend the existing law have been rejected or delayed for a number of reasons. One argument is that the number of people who get married under 18 is so low—and ever decreasing—that it is not worth the legislative time to change the law. However, for those who get married at such a young age, the social impact is enormous, and as we have not legislated for more than a month, we could have fitted it in. The reality is that the largest body of people that this change in the law will protect are not foolish, love-struck teens but vulnerable young women forced into marriages permitted by their own families for a host of social and cultural reasons.

As a nation, we have a moral duty to do everything in our power to reduce the number of forced marriages and close loopholes that make it possible to obtain such marriages by legal means. This relatively simple and straightforward change to the existing law would have a significant impact on young people. Marriage is a major life decision for which children are not emotionally or physically ready. Marriage is intended to be a lifetime commitment and should not be rushed into. Setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 provides an objective, rather than subjective, standard of maturity, which safeguards a child from being married when they are not ready.
I passionately believe that it should be our priority to protect children, and that may mean from themselves as well as from potential dangers from others. The very fact that children of 16 and 17 need the consent of their parents to be married shows that they are not mature enough to make the decisions themselves—they are children. Increasing the age to 18 ensures that teenagers do not recklessly and naively rush into marriage, but it also protects them from the demands of parents who try to push their offspring to marry early. I say this as somebody who believes in marriage; I am not trying to stop marriage, just for those who are too young. In both cases, child marriages suffer from complications that too often end in divorce.

This year marks 101 years of the suffragette movement. We should recall that it was pressure from those brave campaigners that brought about the Age of Marriage Act 1929. Until then there was no defined minimum age, and making it 16 was seen as protecting children. However, 90 years ago, most young people aged 16 would have been working, probably since they were 14, unlike now, in England, where they must stay in either full-time education or training. My own mother started work at 14, so it would not have been unreasonable for her to get married at 16. She did not; she waited until she was 19, which in my view is still too young. However, life has changed. In other words, that was then and this is now, and we need to move with the times. Culture has changed, and so has our commitment to protecting young people—or at least it should have done.

There are a number of negative consequences from marrying at 16 or 17. Research has shown that child marriage is often associated with leaving education early, limited career and vocational opportunities, serious physical and mental health problems, developmental difficulties for the children born to young mothers, and an increased risk of domestic violence. A clear example of that is that if married children drop out of school and fail to finish education and training, they can subsequently be locked into poverty. It is clear that that phenomenon disproportionately affects girls. Child brides in particular are often isolated, with limited opportunities to participate in the development of their wider communities and reach their full potential in modern society. It is difficult for child brides to pursue education, employment or entrepreneurial opportunities. Child marriage therefore hampers efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development goals. It leaves young brides at risk of premature school drop-out, sexual activity—often without consent or contraception—and the myriad health-related consequences that accompany teenage pregnancy.

The Campaign for Female Education notes that teenage birth rates are highest where child marriage is most prevalent. When girls become pregnant before their bodies are ready, they are at high risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, which endanger the life of both mother and child. Human Rights Watch noted that girls who marry are at higher risk of domestic violence than women who marry as adults. The Campaign for Female Education supports that assertion.

It is interesting to note that, in general, fewer people are getting married at a young age. For marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average age for men marrying in 2015 was 37.5 years and for women it was 35.1 years. People are less likely to settle down quickly when they are young.

There is a far greater focus on education for both men and women now. Quite rightly, ambition and expectation are higher for many young people in the modern day and age. The late teens and early twenties are seen as key development years to study, travel and consider options for the world of work. Historically, women may have got married younger, but in the modern world their education and employment prospects are far greater. Some 37.1% of young women go to university, which did not happen in previous years.

The Campaign for Female Education states that women who are employed reinvest 90% of their earnings in their families, lifting themselves, their children, their siblings and relatives out of poverty. However, when a girl is married as a child, that can often mean the end of her education and impede her ability to become financially independent. The campaign concludes:

“One girl’s potential to lift an entire family, and even a community, out of poverty disappears. This is happening millions of times over. As the inter-generational cycle of poverty continues, youth unemployment and economic instability can lead to conflict, migration, violence.”

Every child bride could have been a doctor, teacher, scientist, entrepreneur or politician even. There is a huge social as well as economic cost to child marriage.

British law should act as a gold standard internationally and reverberate around the world. That should be the case with child marriage. We should be using our influence with other countries to end child marriage. Unfortunately, the UK is out of sync with other western countries and ignores the advice of the international human rights conventions on this issue. The international human rights conventions on women’s rights and on children say that countries should end the practice of enabling child marriage below 18. The UK is violating those commitments. Under the UN sustainable development goals, countries around the world have pledged to end child marriage—any marriage in which one or both spouses are under 18—and we have promised to do that by 2030. Human Rights Watch has asserted that the EU could do more to help to end child marriage, and I understand that the European Parliament is working towards that.

Many countries’ legal systems prevent marriage before the age of 18. I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that I had not researched the position in Europe, but I have looked at Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain, because they recently reformed their laws on child marriage, as did the US state of Virginia. Similar laws are pending in other US states, but not in this country yet. Other countries permit marriage among the young only for certain groups. For instance, according to the US State Department’s human rights report on Trinidad and Tobago from 2014, the official marriage age is 18 for men and women, but Muslims and Hindus have a separate Marriage Act.

International law is very specific about who should be allowed to marry. If a country wants to permit exceptions to the minimum age of 18, “mature, capable” children are allowed to marry, but only “in exceptional circumstances” at age 16 or older, when “such decisions are made by a judge based on legitimate exceptional grounds defined by law” and “without deference to culture and tradition.”
By allowing 16-year-olds to marry without consent from a judge, the UK is in reality breaking international law. However, the great hypocrisy here is that we ask other countries, in the developing world, to abide by international law and ensure that the legal age of marriage is 18. I believe it is vital that the UK live by the standards that it is keen to advocate for in the developing world.

Following the first Girl Summit in 2014, the Department for International Development allocated up to £39 million over five years to support global efforts to prevent child marriages. There is a vast body of work to do, as globally 15 million girls under 18 are married each year. By its proactive contribution, the UK recognised that child marriages result in early pregnancy and girls facing social isolation, interrupted schooling, limited career and vocational opportunities and an increased risk of domestic violence, so why are we not leading the way by increasing the legal age of marriage in this country?

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): If I get the opportunity, I hope to catch your eye, Mr Bailey, and raise a couple of points, but in the interim, let me ask this. My hon. Friend has referred yet again to teenage pregnancy. Can she clarify whether she is seeking to change both the legal age of marriage and the age of sexual consent, or just the legal age of marriage?

Mrs Latham: With my Bill, if I can bring it back after the next Queen’s Speech, I would be looking to change only the age of marriage. I do not think the House would accept changing the legal age at which sex can take place and I think it would be very difficult to stop that—to change that law. Although it might be desirable, I think it would be impossible—just think of all the young people in this country, with hormones racing round their bodies—to stop sex happening. It has happened throughout the ages, and I think that a measure to try to stop it in this day and age would not get through the House. What I want to do is to change the age of marriage, and perhaps that will have some influence in terms of people deciding to keep themselves pure until they get married. That is a hope I have, but I do not know whether it is a reality.

Why are we not leading the way by increasing the legal age of marriage in this country from 16 to 18, which is the recognised age of adulthood? In Bangladesh, which has the second highest absolute number of child marriages in the world—just under 4 million—some lobbyists are said to be using the current UK law as an example of why the legal age of marriage there should be lowered. They are saying, “You allow children to get married. Why shouldn’t we? Why should we listen to you?”

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I have had exactly that experience in Bangladesh. I met the Prime Minister and spoke to her about a law that the country was trying to pass to make marriage legal under 18 in certain circumstances, and she threw back to me, “In your country, you are allowed to marry at 16.” The message was really “Do not come here lecturing us,” so I want to echo the point that the hon. Lady made very well just now.

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We cannot tell people what to do if we are not doing it ourselves. We have to lead by example, and the change that I propose is one way in which we can do that. We need the three relevant Departments in the UK: DFID, the Ministry of Justice; and the Department for Work and Pensions—no. Which Department is the Minister from?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): Does my hon. Friend mean the Home Office?

Mrs Latham: The Home Office—yes, that is it. I thank the Minister, who is so new that I cannot remember which Department he is from.

Those Departments have to work together to bring this change about. Maybe this long debate will be one of the first steps in that process, but as soon as the Queen’s Speech—whenever it is—is over, I intend to bring this matter back as a ten-minute rule Bill or a private Member’s Bill, because it is really important that we set a good example to the rest of the world.

In addition to attempting to stop child marriage on the international stage, it is crucial that we meet the international human rights standards that have been established to put a stop to the practice. I agree with the assertion by the chairwoman of the global advocacy group, Girls Not Brides, Mabel van Oranje:

“Britain’s delay in reforming its own marriage laws is increasingly counterproductive.”

Forced marriage is defined by the Home Office as “a marriage conducted without the valid consent of two parties, where duress is a factor.” It is marriage—a lifetime commitment—entered into by an individual against their will. In the UK, law dictates that forcing someone to marry is a criminal offence. It is child abuse, domestic abuse and a form of violence against women and men.

England and Wales outlawed forced marriages in 2014. That was, in part, down to the work of a campaign by Jasvinder Sanghera of Karma Nirvana, which started in Derby. I know her well, and she has worked tirelessly with that organisation to stop forced marriage, to help girls who have been forced into marriage to escape and to make sure that girls in such marriages are safe. Many of the girls who have been married early for cultural reasons do not feel safe in their own homes.

The outlawing of forced marriage was enshrined in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which sets out that forcing someone, including children, into marriage is illegal and can lead to a maximum of seven years in jail. Previously, the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 came into force along with forced marriage protection orders, which are designed to assist those who are threatened with forced marriage, or by a third party on someone else’s behalf. Those orders can be used to prevent a forced marriage from taking place, or to protect someone who has already been forced into marriage.

I welcome the fact that in the UK, forcing someone into marriage now carries a maximum sentence of seven years in jail. I also acknowledge that in many ways the UK is a world leader in the fight against forced marriage. Unfortunately, however, that does not prevent the practice from happening. The Home Office estimates that between 5,000 and 8,000 people are at risk of being forced into marriage every year in the UK. In 2017, more than a quarter of cases dealt with by the Forced Marriage Unit involved children aged 17 and under, and the vast majority of the victims—77.8%—were female.
The ability to marry at 16 with parental consent is a significant discrepancy in the law here. Too often, parental consent means parental coercion for 16 and 17-year-old children, and sometimes for even younger children, because children can be taken out of school in the UK and sent to another country, where they are married at 14 and kept there until they are 16, and then brought back to the UK at 16. We are told that these girls have parental consent. The organisation Girls Not Brides warns that this “legal loophole” means that child marriages, and potentially forced marriages, are still sanctioned in the UK, because in a number of cases parents do not act as the safeguarding mechanism that the law intended them to be.

In some communities in the UK, the legality of marriage at 16 can result in forced child marriage, whereby parents can consent on behalf of their children. Furthermore, many vulnerable teenagers are being sent overseas to marry. Forced marriage is a violation of human rights and is contrary to UK law, including the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, which states that a marriage shall be voidable if “either party to the marriage did not validly consent to it, whether in consequence to duress, mistake, unsoundness of mind or otherwise.”

Such marriages must be identified and ended. However, an amendment to the law to increase the legal age of marriage to 18 might stop these marriages in the first place, by making them an illegal impossibility here in the UK. On a personal level, individuals may be more mature and able to resist forced marriages at the age of 18, by which stage they may have managed to get to university, or get a job after they have finished training.

Although changes to the law have helped to safeguard people from forced marriages, it is important that educational professionals and local communities are fully aware of the signs of forced marriage. The Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation’s executive director, Diana Nammi, recently stressed the importance of education in a televised interview, saying:

“We need to educate the community as well, we need to let them know that child marriage is a brutal situation.

Many of them think it is just a sexual relationship, but it’s a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the children and they are not prepared yet.”

To conclude, I strongly believe that the legal age of marriage should be increased from 16 to 18. It is important that we rewrite marriage law here, so that it is fit for the 21st century and aligns with international law.

I was pleased to learn that 79% of 2,700 respondents agreed with me that the minimum age for marriage and civil partnerships should rise from 16 to 18 in a recent poll, which was conducted between 10 and 14 May on the social media pages of the House of Commons. I thank the House’s digital engagement programme for conducting this research for me.

At the heart of this matter is a moral dilemma about our values, not only here at home but internationally. This country is an advocate on the international stage for the eradication of child marriage and we must practice what we preach. I am on the International Development Committee and I have been out to many countries and seen how some of them are trying their best to raise the age of marriage, but that is not happening here. As I say, we must practise what we preach. Ultimately, I am in agreement with UNICEF’s assertion that “marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights.”

Meanwhile, forced marriage has a profound personal impact. In a recent Sky News feature, one interviewee—Mrs Khan—recalled her experience, which captures the sad reality of forced marriage. She said:

“It took away so much freedom from me. I could have met someone I loved. Instead, I was forced to get married, forced to have children, forced to put up with so many unbearable things.”

Therefore, I would like to see the Government pass clear and consistent legislation that establishes 18 as the minimum age of marriage, with no exceptions for customary law, parental consent or judicial consent. It is also clear that increasing the minimum age of marriage to 18 would provide a vehicle to help to safeguard girls and boys from being married before they are ready, or indeed from entering into a forced marriage by legal means.

I will finish my speech today by quoting the judge, Mr Justice Peace, in the landmark legal case, Pugh v. Pugh, in 1951. He spoke of the capacity of young people to marry and his words are as relevant today as they were then, 70 years ago. He stated in his conclusions:

“According to modern thought it is considered socially and morally wrong that persons of age, at which we now believe them to be immature and provide for their education, should have the stresses, responsibilities and sexual freedom of marriage and the physical strain of childbirth. Child marriages by common consent are bad for the participants and bad for the institution of marriage.”

9.58 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), to his post. It is good to see him here in Westminster Hall.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) not just on raising this issue but on making what really was a powerful speech. We use the word “powerful” so often in this House, but her speech really was exemplary, setting out so many of the arguments that I am now wondering what I will say. She and I will remember our visit to Ethiopia as members of the Select Committee on International Development. We spent quite some time in a village community where DFID was working to encourage young girls to defer their marriages. It was working successfully, particularly with the community elders—the leaders—and had transformed the lives of some of those young women.

As we have heard from Mabel van Oranje, the chairman of the global advocacy group Girls Not Brides, the UK should practise what it preaches. Girls Not Brides argues that the major impacts of getting married young are that girls are more likely to drop out of school; they never have a chance to develop the vocational skills that will enable them to enter the world of work; and they are at greater risk of marital rape, domestic abuse, serious depression and health problems. All of those issues were discussed with us in those communities in Ethiopia, and the benefits of deferring marriage were clearly shown to us. Indeed, we had the opportunity to meet a number of the young women who were benefiting substantially.
I will give a couple of examples to flesh out the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has made. One of them refers to a lady called Amina, whose parents were born in Bangladesh. Interestingly, it has also been made clear to me that the proposals to change the law in Bangladesh to allow marriage at 16 cited British law as a justification. Amina—not her real name—is now a mother of four in her 30s, and lives in London. She had never talked to her husband before her wedding, just after her 17th birthday. It was an arranged marriage, arranged by her parents; it put an end to her studies and plunged her into depression. She says:

“The marriage was all about fear. I was a total stranger in my own house. I was really naive. I felt like a child myself when I had my first children...It was a big sacrifice of my life. I had no chance to explore things. I went through terrible times.”

Another example, that of Zee, has been reported by Reuters. When Zee was 13, she returned home from school one day to find an engagement party underway at her home in the north of England. Her excitement at the celebrations quickly turned to shock when she asked her mother, “Who’s getting married?” and her mother said, “It’s you!” She told Reuters that her betrothed was represented by a photo; he was an older cousin whom she had never met, who lived in Afghanistan, her parents’ country of birth. She said to the reporter:

“One day I’m not even allowed to talk to boys and the next I’m getting married...I was dressed up”—

this was at the engagement party—

“to look like a Christmas tree—very sparkly, very bling. Everyone was happy. The only person who was miserable was me”.

Zee escaped by running away from home, but many are not so fortunate. The latest figures I have from the Government’s forced marriage unit—the Minister may have more recent ones—are that of the 1,196 victims dealt with, one in four was below the age of 18. That is around 300 people. Interestingly, one in five was a male victim, so we must not forget them either.

The points that we are making are serious, because every one of those victims is an individual life. It cannot be acceptable to say that the numbers are not great; those are substantial numbers, and the impact on those young people is lifelong. The impact is not just on them, because if a marriage is good and positive, it is good not just for the people involved within it but for any children they might have and, indeed, for the community around them.

This is national Marriage Week, so the next part of my speech will touch a bit more widely on the importance of marriage. Marriage is a major life-changing decision that establishes a family, often—though not always—with children as part of it. Strong marriages contribute greatly to a stable and flourishing society, including the wellbeing of those children, so it is in all our interests to promote good marriages, including through public policy. It is what everyone wants from marriage.

However, although marriage is a source of great pleasure, it can also be challenging. At times it requires perseverance, which more often than not requires a degree of maturity in understanding human relationships, and understanding both ourselves and others. That must be very difficult at the ages of 16 or 17—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has said, remains difficult for many years afterwards. Marriage is far easier if we make a wise choice at the outset about who we marry and who we will be compatible with, because it is going to last a very long time. As I say, that necessitates an understanding of ourselves, as well as of others.

The Church of England marriage service says of marriage that

“no one should enter into it lightly or selfishly.”

It is

“a sign of unity and loyalty which all should...honour. It enriches society and strengthens community.”

We should not expect that of 16 or 17-year-olds, especially in today's complex world. When my hon. Friend's mother or grandmother was getting married, life was so much simpler: often, one married someone within one's local community, who had grown up with the same values and customs. That so often is not the case now. Life is complicated for these young people, and they also have much higher expectations for their life fulfilment than maybe two or three generations ago. It is too big an ask to expect them to be able to make that decision at 16 or 17, even if it is their own decision and not forced on them. The risk of allowing those young people to marry is too great. We should support them and, I believe, protect them from what could be not just their most major, life-changing decision, but the most damaging decision that they could make. Making the wrong major, life-changing decision can be the biggest mistake of a lifetime.

For many reasons, I fully support my hon. Friend's proposal. Indeed, I would go a bit further and say that anyone contemplating marriage should be offered the opportunity to take advantage of the wealth of resources out there to help people, particularly young people, make the right decision. We as policymakers could do that, for example, by promoting policy No. 11 in the manifesto to strengthen families—the Minister is smiling. I carry a copy in my handbag, virtually permanently.

Paul Maynard: I am not surprised.

Fiona Bruce: I am very glad to hear that; we are making some impact. Here is policy No. 11, which as I say, I am unashamedly talking about in national Marriage Week:

“Promote high quality marriage preparation by waiving Marriage Registration Fees for couples who take part in an accredited marriage preparation course.”

Not only would that help remove one of the financial barriers to marriage, but it would encourage the uptake of marriage preparation courses. Those courses could be kitemarked, such as the marriage preparation course for engaged couples produced by Holy Trinity Brompton. We have showcased that course, along with a number of other resources, through the all-party parliamentary group for strengthening couple relationships and reducing interparental conflict. They really are excellent materials for people who want to embark on married life with a greater understanding of what it involves. Indeed, after going through some of those courses, some people decide that they are not going to get married. Is that not success, too? Is that not helping to protect them from the heartache and disappointment that marriages can entail if they do not work out?

One of my parliamentary staff members, Sophia, attended the marriage preparation course when she was engaged; she is now married. She says that it was “very helpful and laid a strong foundation for going into marriage”;

Paul Maynard: I am not surprised.
and she would recommend it. If a couple are busy, Marriage Care offers a “marriage preparation in a day” course, and there are resources on the web such as marriagebydesign.org.uk, which is made available by Care for the Family. That organisation has a host of other resources—I actually went on one of its marriage preparation courses 29 years ago, so it must work. Harry Benson has written a tiny relationship tip booklet, “Let’s stick together”, which he says contains “simple guidelines to keep your love alive and keep you together.” Can I recommend that the Minister considers the whole manifesto, and in particular policy No. 11, this week?

The structure of the house we live in when we start off in married life—I know that it is a struggle for some young people to find a home of their own—cannot be stable without strong foundations. No one would expect a house to stay up for long if it was not built on strong foundations; it would collapse. So, too, with marriage, which is too big an issue to leave to chance. A little help from us as policy makers, including by raising the marriage age, could go a long way to helping facilitate lifelong fulfillment for many people, as well as a more flourishing society.

10.10 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I will endeavour to be brief. I have just been doing a quick bit of research while the debate has been taking place. To start, I notice that throughout the European Union—I appreciate that that may not be regarded as a particularly good example at present—the average age of marriage is fixed at 18 legally. That varies in some cases between men and women. In the Nordic countries, for example, the age for males to marry without consent appears to be 18, while for women it can be 16, which tells us something about the problems we are facing in this day and age. That is why I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) about the age of consent. There are those of us who believe, as she clearly does and as I do, that the age of marriage without or even with consent is too young and needs to be raised to 18, but we then have the problem of promoting unmarried sexual relationships, which many of us would not wish to seek to do. There is a dilemma there.

I was running a yard rule over the ages of consent, and they range from 11 in Nigeria up to Portugal at 21, though the age of consent for marriage in Portugal is 18, which presumably makes for some interesting celibate relationships between the ages of 18 and 21. I am not sure how they square that circle, but happily that is not our problem. We are here to discuss the situation that prevails and the situation we would like to see prevail in the United Kingdom.

I have listened to the arguments of my hon. Friend the Members for Mid Derbyshire and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and I concur with virtually everything they said, but I do not think we are here this morning to preach, and I am not here to sit in judgment on my fellow man or, in this case, more particularly, my fellow woman. Relationships and cultures vary, but we live in a United Kingdom that sets its norms and standards by the wishes of our population, and, in so far as it is possible—I think it is right to use the phrase that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire used—we try to set a gold standard. We seek to do what is right for the young men and women of our country, of whatever colour, class, denomination or creed.

I hope you will permit this, Mr Bailey, but I will digress very slightly. During the debates on same-sex relationships—note that I use the word “relationships”—as a Christian and an Anglican, I apparently heretically raised the proposal that marriage, a word I use advisedly, is a relationship between a man and a woman with a view to procreation and that anything else is a partnership. That is something that prevails not only in the Christian faith, but in many other faiths—probably most. I put forward the suggestion that we should recognise the fundamental difference between a civil union and a faith marriage and that the word “marriage” should be reserved for faith. I would have got rid of registry office weddings and civil unions and had one category of civil partnership, whether heterosexual or same-sex, for everything else. That would have made a much safer definition for everyone, but unhappily we did not go down that road at the time, because that was not the way the political wind or political correctness were going.

While seeking to recognise the separation between the age of consent and marriage, or civil union—in this context, I will use “civil union” from now on—it seems to me that one of the duties we have is to protect young people from predatory older adults of whatever sex. I can just about remember when I was 16. I suspect I was fairly vulnerable; I suspect most of us were and I suspect that young people today still are, in the main, in the United Kingdom, which is what we are talking about.

I understand the culture of arranged marriages, but that is not what we practise in our culture. I do not think they are advisable or desirable, but if such marriages are going to take place and that is the nature of the culture, I see no reason whatever why even an arranged marriage should not be arranged at 18, rather than 16. I take the point that has been made that 18 ought to allow a child to have a childhood, an education and a degree of maturity, whether male or female, before entering into what for some of us is the most sacred of unions. By the way, I speak as a hypocrite, because I am a divorced married man. I am happily married now, but I have to concede that my “till death us do part” vows did not hold. I want to set the record straight on that. I am unable, in the terms of my faith, to marry the lady whom I love and live with in a Christian church because technically, in the eyes of the Lord, I am still married.

Although I support the motion, I want to put down one caveat, which is that comparisons with other continents are dangerous. I have worked as an international election observer in many countries for some years, but particularly throughout the continent of Africa, where the voting age is 18, as it is in most countries. I recall very vividly challenging a young lady about her voting intention as she was queueing to vote. I asked her to produce a card, which she did. She had an ID card that claimed she was over 18. Well, that young lady was certainly not a day over 13, but she was carrying a baby on her back, and it was her baby. It was borne in upon me by local people that although this young lady was probably well under 18, sadly, in the terms of that particular country, where the average lifespan for a young woman is still probably only about 35, she was actually nearly halfway through her life.
If we look at it from that point of view, to suggest that that union, inside or outside of marriage, should not have taken place, becomes ridiculous. We have to recognise that while we may set an example and want to raise the bar ourselves and say, “This is what is right for our young people,” it ill behoves us to go to far-flung places to try to tell other people in other countries with other cultures and, sadly, other life expectancies, how to live.

Mrs Latham: I understand what my right hon. Friend says, but the girl is a child. If he thinks she was only 13, she must have been pregnant when she was 12. Whatever the culture of the country, it is a terrible burden for her; however long her life will be. She could have had the child at that age as a result of rape. She probably was not married. If she was married, it was probably a forced marriage. I cannot agree with his point, because that girl should never have had a child at that age. Whether she lives to 35 or 95, it matters not; her body is not ready for it. I fundamentally disagree with the point that he has made.

Sir Roger Gale: I knew it would be a point of disagreement; it was fairly inevitable. That is why I said carefully that I do not think we can come here and preach this morning. Secondly, while we are entitled to set our own gold standards and yardsticks, we should not seek to impose them on other people in other countries with other cultures. We can set an example and help to raise standards of living and life expectancy in other countries through our aid programmes and in other ways, but we cannot tell them what they should do.

The reality on the ground is precisely the reality that my hon. Friend conceded when she said we could not fix the age of marriage in this country to the age of consent. We have to live with the reality internationally. The reality in this country can well be marriage at 18, and in my view and my hon. Friend’s view, it should be, but to say that we are going to stand like Canute at the waves’ side and tell the tide to go away is nonsense. Realistically, politically and practically, we will not be able to raise the age of consent. It simply will not happen.

There is an incompatibility between the age of consent argument and what we are proposing, which I endorse: the age of marriage at 18. I would prefer people to be married or in a formal, legal civil union before they have children, but in reality that is not the case. With those caveats, I am pleased to support my hon. Friend’s motion.

10.22 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing this important debate. I thank Members for their valuable contributions today. The hon. Lady argued for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnerships, which I will respond to, but first I will lay out the current position.

The current law in England and Wales states that the minimum age for marriage or civil partnership without parental consent is 18. The number of 16 and 17-year-olds who married in 2016 stood at just 18 months could not stand the sight of each other. We can set an example and help to raise standards of living and life expectancy in other countries through our aid programmes and in other ways, but we cannot tell them what they should do.

Statistics from the forced marriage unit show that in 2017, where the age was known, 15% of cases involved victims below 16 years of age, and nearly 30% involved those under 18, so the UK Government must do more to ensure that victims of forced marriage are listened to and given the support they require. Those who force vulnerable individuals into marriage—for example, to secure immigration status in the UK—must be challenged.

Although I welcome the steps that the Government are taking against forced marriage, including their public consultation into introducing a legal mandatory reporting duty relating to cases of forced marriage, they have been too slow to react and those who are suffering now need urgent help.

I get what the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire says regarding maturity, but if we allow people to join the Army and buy a lottery ticket at 16, and given that Wales is currently consulting on lowering the voting age to 16, we cannot say that they are mature enough to do all of those things, but not mature enough to marry. I know several couples who met in school, married at 16 and have had wonderful married lives together. I also know many people who got married at 40 and within 18 months could not stand the sight of each other.

Sir Roger Gale: I think I am absolutely correct in saying that although it is technically possible for somebody to join the Army as a boy soldier at 16, they are not allowed to engage in combat until they are an adult.

Carolyn Harris: I do not disagree with the right hon. Gentleman; I was making the case that they were eligible to join the Army at 16.

Couples can fall out of love at any age; I do not believe that age plays any part in how their future develops. If this debate was about protecting people from forced marriage, I would 100% agree with the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire, and if it was about thousands and thousands of 16-year-olds getting married and then finding themselves getting divorced a few months later, I would also agree, but in reality we are talking about a very small number of young people who decide to get married very young for whatever reason. I remain receptive to the arguments, but I want to see a bigger conversation. Far be it from us to stand in the way of
love’s young dream. I cannot honestly say that if my 16-year-old son came to me and said he wanted to get married, I would be best pleased, but I would support his decision and help him and his future partner in any way I could.

I really do appreciate the hon. Lady’s sentiments, but can we truly say that by increasing the age for marriage and civil partnerships to 18 we will stop forced marriage and unwanted pregnancies, and stop people remaining in happy relationships purely because they are 16? Let us have a bigger debate and work collectively to ensure that we protect and offer equality for all.

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bailey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs. Latham) for giving me such a fascinating first outing as the Minister responsible for family justice. I had never given the subject a moment’s thought until Saturday morning when I learned it was on the agenda. I have had a fascinating few days thinking about it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for their interesting comments. I also thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), my parliamentary next-door neighbour—not geographically, although we share an interest in tidal barrages, but in terms of where our offices are on the parliamentary estate.

The debate has been fascinating. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has a compelling track record on this issue. I pay genuine tribute to her for the knowledge, advocacy and expertise that she brings to the issue. I have listened carefully and thought deeply about the points she has made, which should be the start of a dialogue. As the Minister, I have to take an administrative approach predicated upon the evidence presented to me. The Government understand the concerns about any possible link between marriages involving parties aged 16 and 17 and forced marriage more generally. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton pointed out—in this, national Marriage Week—marriage will always be one of our most important institutions, but only where consenting parties enter of their own free will and free choice. There can be no doubt that it is a serious violation to be deprived of marital autonomy, and the potential cost for victims of any age, gender or background is abundantly clear.

As the hon. Member for Swansea East pointed out, we announced the launch of a forced marriage public consultation, which sought views on issues such as a possible mandatory reporting duty, requiring certain professionals to report cases of forced marriage and how Government guidance should be updated. In answer to a question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, the Prime Minister said that we will operate a tarmac roller until they are 21. There is still a spectrum of what we consider, as wider society, to be the point at which we reach adulthood and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet pointed out, there is a range of options across Europe and the wider developed world regarding when marriage can occur.

Some US states allow marriage at 18 as of right, and at 16 if some conditions are met. Other countries have taken other approaches. Spain, for example, raised the minimum age to 16, with consents for under-18s, in response to specific concerns about child marriage and forced marriage. Sweden raised the minimum age of marriage in 2014, removing the ability of under-18s to marry with consents. Those differences demonstrate that there is no clear consensus yet in the developed world regarding the minimum age. However, we should continually monitor the impact of changes and their effectiveness, particularly in what goes on around the world more widely.

We have discussed the numbers of people affected in the UK. As the hon. Member for Swansea East pointed out, in 2016, the last year for which we have figures, only 179 people aged 16 or 17 entered an opposite-sex marriage—down from 424 in 2006. Clearly, it is a declining feature of our marriage system. None the less, I strongly take the point that, whether the number of people affected is 400, 100, 10 or one, we should still have the issue at the forefront of our mind.

The British social attitudes report identifies a dramatic shift in British society’s opinions on marriage, and changing norms about formal and informal unions. Men and women have increasingly been marrying at a later age because of their education, employment and economic opportunities, without any prompt by legislative change. I would be fascinated to see any research on the reasons of those 179 under-18s for marriage. I am sure that a charity, think-tank or group out there will take up that challenge, so we will not have to speculate about who those 179 people are. That might help us to identify the extent to which forced marriage is a component.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire made it clear that the fact that consents are needed shows that people might not be mature enough to make those decisions themselves. I understand that, but it is worth pointing out that consents are not a loophole; the law derives from the concept of the age of majority. When the age of majority for getting married was 21,
consents were required for anyone under that age. A long-standing provision exists not to make an exception for people to marry at certain ages, but to respect what Parliament has previously determined to be the age of majority.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet introduced the important point that consequential changes would follow were the proposed change enacted. Where would it leave the age of consent? That is a whole new debate that would open up. There would also be consequential changes on other pieces of legislation that involve marriage, dating well back in our statute book. I realise how deeply felt the implications might be, and any change requires careful thought and engagement. Wider policies are brought in, in terms of what happens in Northern Ireland and Scotland, when we, yet again, have different regimes and disparities are introduced. We need to take into account the legal, moral and societal repercussions of any change such as the one proposed. The Government have a duty to explore that carefully in my view.

Perhaps most pertinently, we have to consider whether any such change would affect the incidence of forced marriage in the UK. Raising the domestic marriage age would not by itself prevent people from marrying informally, such as in a religious ceremony that was not legally binding, or from marrying abroad. Amending the minimum age of marriage would not necessarily deter perpetrators from coercing children into marriage through another route, or make the crime of forced marriage any more visible than it is currently. It is also unclear whether a change in the law would necessarily change the attitudes of families and communities who want to exert control over a young person’s decision to marry.

As I said at the beginning, I will look carefully at the consultation responses to try to identify themes that might emerge and that might help to buttress the case, or perhaps diminish it—who knows? However, there is clearly an important international dimension to the debate, as many Members have set out in much more depth than I could. I will not repeat ad nauseam the points made about the work that we have been doing as a Government with the forced marriage unit. I am immensely grateful for all its efforts. The fact that, of more than 1,900 applications since it came into being, more than 1,800 have been granted demonstrates that there is an issue that we need to deal with and that, so far, our actions are having the desired effect. We are sending a clear message that the abhorrent practice of forced marriage is unacceptable and the UK will not tolerate it, domestically or overseas.

Although the number of 16 and 17-year-olds marrying in England and Wales continues to decline, worldwide one in four women are married under 18, and one in 12, incredibly, is married under 15. There is a broad range of contributors to the problem in less developed countries, including community and cultural pressures, a lack of education or employment opportunities, and stigma around illegitimacy. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet, whose name I saw pop up on the all-party parliamentary group’s 2012 report, which looked into this issue and brought it to the forefront of public debate.

I agree that the international dimension is crucial, and we must continue to have it at the forefront of our mind. I reassure Members that the debate will not end today. I will continue to show an interest, but there are many strands that have to be pulled together. I am open to ongoing dialogue with Members, but I am conscious of the limitations that might be found in merely enacting the proposed change. I thank everyone for their contributions and look forward to seeing Members more frequently, I suspect, in Westminster Hall discussing many similar issues.

10.38 am

Mrs Latham: It has been a really interesting debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for taking part. I know that many others wanted to contribute but were unable to attend. I hear what everybody has had to say.

I urge the Minister to work with the Ministry of Justice and the Department for International Development to see if we can agree to look at the issue firmly. I know that the Justice Minister who has oversight of this matter is keen to bring it in—

Paul Maynard: The Home Office.

Mrs Latham: Sorry—the Home Office. I am confusing my Departments again. Furthermore, those in DFID look rather foolish if they are telling other countries to raise the age of marriage to 18, so I think they will also be keen to take this matter on.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend puts her finger on a point that those of us who promote strengthening families make time and again: no single Department is overseeing the issue, because it straddles several Departments. We need a senior Minister, ideally at Cabinet level, to oversee the issues that affect families.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. We have a little time available, so I have been fairly lenient in allowing interventions on what should be just a summing-up speech, but I ask hon. Members not to abuse that leniency.

Mrs Latham: Thank you, Mr Bailey. The Minister said that there are not many marriages under the age of 18, but actually I think the issue is under-reported: there are more forced marriages than we know about, and we need to protect girls from them.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke about children being able to sign up to the Army. However, it could be argued that it is education and training, because up to the age of 18 they cannot fight on the frontline. That is just what we have legislated for; we want people to stay in education and training until that age.

It is interesting that this debate has come up in National Marriage Week, which is an important thing. I am not trying to stop teenagers who have fallen in love at school, who are love’s young dream and who want to get married, but I think that they can wait until they are 18. There is no compulsion for them to get married that much earlier; waiting would give them time to reflect.

Northern Ireland and Scotland have been mentioned, but the marriage age should probably be a devolved matter, so we should look just at England and Wales. I
am sure that Northern Ireland would not disagree that 18 is the right age, but I think Scotland would argue differently.

Finally, I recommend that the Minister reads Jasvinder Sanghera’s book “Shame”, which tells her life story. She has written several other books, including “Daughters of Shame”. Her story is quite sobering. Her sister had a forced marriage under the age of 18; she was taken away, forced to marry somebody she did not know and brought back to this country. It was a very unhappy marriage, and in the end she decided to cover herself in petrol and set herself alight. That was in the streets of Derby; it is very close to my heart. I recommend “Shame” because it shows the realities of forced marriage. It is slightly out of date, because it happened a few years ago, but the point stands.

Increasing the minimum age will not stop forced marriage, but children of 18 are that much more mature and have more of an opportunity to tell their parents, “No, I don’t want to do this. I want to go to university, study and make something of my life.” I urge the Minister to work with other Departments to make our proposal a reality. I will be bringing it back after the Queen’s Speech, so I urge him to get on with it, please.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership.

10.43 am

Sitting suspended.

Rape Trials: Treatment of Victims

11 am

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered rape trials and CPS treatment of victims.

It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mr Bailey. I was recently privileged to meet an extraordinary and courageous young woman from my constituency at my weekly MP’s surgery. She told me that in May last year a man had attempted to rape her on her way home from a night spent with friends. Physically hurt and emotionally distraught, she made the brave decision to go to the police and seek justice for herself and our community. I was saddened to learn that at the most vulnerable time in her life, when she was most in need of human care and protection, she had been left feeling let down by our justice system.

Time and again, this lady has repeated that although she cannot change what has happened to her, she can try to change what happens to others. As her Member of Parliament, I feel it is only right to speak on behalf of my constituent, who is a voice for many other survivors of rape, attempted rape and sexual assault, to draw attention to the need for urgent Government reform.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and I wonder whether he will take back to his constituent the heartfelt feelings of the House for the ordeal that she went through—please convey our best wishes to her. This is not something new or limited to this incident: there are plenty of examples of how the Crown Prosecution Service has not handled this sort of thing very well. I applaud him for what he is trying to do with this debate.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for coming today. He will find out that we are trying to do exactly what he said. My constituent is in the Public Gallery—not because she can change what has happened to her, but because we can try to change things for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on everything he does in the House, and particularly on this case. I commend him for what he is doing on behalf of his constituents. There have been 820 accusations of rape in Northern Ireland, but only 15 convictions. Does he believe that the CPS, in co-ordination with the police forces, can enable more cases to be tried successfully by offering greater support to the victims and their families—in other words, by working together on behalf of the victim?

Robert Halfon: As so often, the hon. Gentleman gets it in one. From what I am about to say, he will see that I agree with him. I am sure the Minister is listening to what he and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) are saying.

First, I want to raise the issues of sentencing for attempted rape and the lack of transparency in published statistics. Secondly, I want to turn to the treatment of victims who report their assault, and call for Government action to make this process easier. We must strive to ensure that justice is served and that there is always compassion and support for the victim.
Section 1(4) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 sets out that the maximum penalty for rape is life imprisonment. Under the Criminal Attempts Act 1981, a person who attempts to commit the full offence of rape shall also be liable for a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. In the case of my Harlow constituent, her attacker had the intention, or mens rea, to commit the full offence. Had it not been for the fact that she had the sheer physical strength to fight him off until a security guard heard her screaming for help and intervened, his attempt might have been undeterred.

In their legislative form, the offences of attempted rape and rape are considered punishable by equal measure. However, by taking into account the circumstances of the case under the Sentencing Council’s guidelines, the court often imposes a lesser sentence on perpetrators of attempted rape because they have not committed the actus reus of rape. For my Harlow constituent, she feels let down by the justice system—robbed of the possibility of a longer sentence for the perpetrator because she fought so hard to fend him off. Will the Minister clarify the Sentencing Council’s guidelines for attempted rape and the basis on which their effectiveness as a means of securing justice is tested?

Another key problem on the subject of sentencing for sexual offences is the lack of clarity in the statistics. I welcome the Justice Secretary’s response to my letter on sentencing for attempted rape, but I was shocked by his acknowledgement that “The Ministry of Justice does not disaggregate attempted rape from rape offences by sentence length in published figures.”

Can the Minister tell us whether the Attorney General’s Office and the Ministry of Justice will commit to transparency in sentencing figures for rape and attempted rape, so that we have a much clearer basis on which to assess the suitability of existing law? Will she ensure that this is clearly published, rather than buried in spreadsheets and data tools?

Only 15% of sexual violence cases are reported to the police, and only 7.5% of rape charges result in conviction. These statistics are devastating and demand urgent Government attention. A whole host of factors might well be to blame for these figures: a high threshold for sufficient evidence; the CPS’s continuous demand for more intrusive personal data, including from mobile phones; and the myths surrounding what constitutes rape, to name but a few. However, some responsibility must be borne by the treatment of victims before, during and after trial. We are discouraging people from reporting their assault or forcing them to drop charges, because they cannot bear to continue.

After making the courageous decision to give her statement to the police, the process of my Harlow constituent’s fight for justice has been arduous and often extremely uncomfortable. It is important that I go through some of her experiences in detail—sadly, my constituent’s account is not unique. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, she waited eight hours in discomfort, exhaustion and emotional trauma to have forensic evidence collected at the sexual assault referral centre, or SARC. She was not permitted to wash and was asked to strip down before being swabbed from head to toe and photographed. She was then interviewed and asked intrusive personal questions. At the time, she was constantly waiting for nurses, police and support staff to attend to her.

As they are often the first port of call after an assault, SARC’s play a crucial role in the victim’s ability to secure justice. It is possibly the most critical part of the process in obtaining forensic evidence that can be used by the prosecution at trial. However, we make victims wait in distress and discomfort, because otherwise they risk evidence being lost due to a lack of qualified staff. The rape support fund has been a cornerstone for support services, and I wholeheartedly welcome the Government’s commitment under the victims strategy to increase spending from £31 million in 2016-17 to £39 million in 2020-21. The solution is not necessarily throwing more money at the problem, although more money will always be welcome; it is essential that money is being used wisely and efficiently to maximise reach.

NHS England says that SARC’s delivered services to 20,000 people in 2017-18. In the same year, Rape Crisis supported 78,000 individuals on £10 million less funding. What measure will the Minister take to ensure that the £39 million is used to staff SARC’s properly? While they are not staffed properly, we are not only adding to the distress and anguish of victims, but potentially risking the successful prosecution of people who commit such horrific acts. Additionally, the all-party parliamentary group on sexual violence, together with Rape Crisis, has identified concerns about increased competition for this extra money and whether there will be any significant changes to individual centres.

The consequences, of course, are felt by the end user—the victim. As my constituent’s experience shows, the Government’s commitment to strengthen victim support, although wholly admirable, does not always trickle down to the people using the services. For example, sexual assault victims do not get the psychological support that they need. Waiting times for counselling are as long as one year, and the counselling sessions that individuals are offered may be just for a few weeks.

My constituent realised that she needed much more counselling. She actively pressed for more, and was given it. On top of her emotional trauma, she felt guilty that she may have been depriving someone else of vital support. People who have already been through an emotional and horrific ordeal should not be concerned about that. Will the Minister ensure that the additional funding outlined in the Government’s victims strategy will be channelled to staff support services properly, minimise waiting times and allow survivors to start getting on with their lives?

In the months leading up to the trial, my constituent was contacted regularly by the police, who asked more questions and wanted more statements, interviews and photographs of the bruising. The trial took more than a week and a half. She had to express her discomfort at the idea that her attacker would be in the same room as her before a screen was put up. She described the trial and cross-examination as:

“A torturous experience of being asked the most vulgar questions...based on the attacker’s recall of the event, which made me feel so uncomfortable and emotional, whilst being forced under pressure by the lawyer”.

Even after a guilty verdict has been reached, victims are still not free to get on with their lives. My constituent had to wait months before her attacker was sentenced to six years.

Survivors of assault put themselves through that not because they want to, but because it is their only hope of building a case, and yet we jeopardise it by making
I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow for raising this issue. I am very pleased to see the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) in the Chamber. I look forward to hearing about her expertise in this very important area.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said that it is important that we treat victims sensitively and with respect. I agree. I am pleased to have the opportunity today, in my first debate in my new role, to discuss how we can improve the system and what we are already doing. My right hon. Friend went through many issues thoroughly, and I want to respond to them. He said that the sentences for rape and attempted rape start similarly. Rape carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, and he is right that attempted rape has the same maximum penalty. A judge will have regard to the sentencing guidelines for the substantive offence, but he then selects a starting point based on harm and culpability as if he were sentencing for the full offence. He will then reduce the starting point at the lower end of the category range to reflect the fact that it was an attempted rape, not a rape. The amount of the reduction will depend on how close the offence was to being completed, and a judgment will be made on a case-by-case basis.

I realise that victims of rape and attempted rape will be extremely traumatised, but they should know that, regardless of the sentence imposed by the court, anyone convicted or cautioned for a relevant sexual offence is automatically made subject to notification requirements—in other words, they are placed on the sex offenders register. The court can also make a sexual harm prevention order on anyone convicted or cautioned for a relevant sexual offence, which can prohibit the individual from doing anything described within it, as long as the court has determined it to be proportionate and necessary.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the lack of clarity in the statistics. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of data. I assure him that the Ministry of Justice is conscious of the importance of data and transparency. During my time there, we worked with the media to improve public transparency. When we build a common platform for taking cases in the criminal justice process through a digital system, we will use it to improve the collection of data, which can then be shared. My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the distinction between the statistics collected on rape and attempted rape. I will pass that on to the Ministry of Justice so it can address the collection of its data as the common platform develops. With better data, we can have better scrutiny.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the treatment of victims and how they feel treated. He is right to say that the figures for reporting and for convictions could be better. That is not a new issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley rightly pointed out, but we have some positive news. According to the most recent figures in the year ending June 2018, there was an 18% increase in reporting of sexual offences. The CPS has also doubled the number of specialist prosecutors in its dedicated rape and serious sexual offences units.

We need to improve the care of those brave enough to come forward. The CPS is working with the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to revise the victims’ code, to improve the support and care offered to victims. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned,
cross-Department and cross-agency work is important. The CPS is also working with the police to ensure that we improve the process of the criminal justice system.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow mentioned mental health, which is very important. I cannot begin to imagine the consequences of such an ordeal for someone’s mental health. We are launching a new toolkit for therapists and prosecutors on the support that an individual who suffers from a mental health condition will require.

My right hon. Friend mentioned his constituents’ use of a screen, which is an important part of the special provisions in court. We are trying to improve access to special measures, and the Ministry of Justice has committed to recording and monitoring applications for special measures, to ensure that everyone who is entitled to them can access them.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the role of sexual assault referral centres, or SARCcs, and the significant funds invested in them. NHS England investment in SARC services increased from £8 million in 2013 to £31 million in 2018-19. As he mentioned, that funding has risen this year and will rise further next year. He is right, however, to say that, as with all public services, funding alone is not sufficient; it needs to be well spent. I say to him that, locally, police and NHS England commissioners have meetings with providers to review their performance. Nationally, NHS England undertakes internal assurance to look at cost, performance and quality, as well as areas of emergent risk.

I am deeply sorry that my right hon. Friend’s constituent had to wait a long time in a SARC. I understand that long waits in SARCcs are unusual, as a referral is usually immediate for adults, and an out-of-hours policy states that a SARC can be opened for a referral, which can take up to two hours. I am sorry about her experience. The police, police and crime commissioners and the NHS should all hold SARCcs to account. The Care Quality Commission has also started to inspect SARCcs and publish the findings on its website. It is extremely important that we ensure that SARCcs, which receive public funding, work well.

My right hon. Friend mentioned delays and the time that it takes not only for a case to come to court, but to go through court. It is true that sexual offence cases take longer to go through the criminal justice system than other cases. That is because sexual offences, especially rape, are some of the most challenging and complex cases with which the CPS deals. Yesterday, I met the Director of Public Prosecutions and I raised the issue of delays when such cases go through the system. He made the same point that I have about the difficulty in evidencing those types of cases. He stressed the importance of ensuring that when such traumatic cases are reported, sufficient work is done to ensure a fair trial and that, at the end of the day, if the perpetrator is guilty, he or she is brought to justice.

Unfortunately, successful prosecutions take time. We want to speed up the court process and ensure that cases are heard effectively. I know, through my time at the MOJ, that in both Crown court and magistrates court we are trying to reform the process to ensure that cases are heard more efficiently, through transforming summary justice and better case management systems in both jurisdictions.

This is a terribly important area because people who suffer from serious violent sexual offences—or attempted serious violent sexual offences—may deal with the consequences for life, as we heard from my right hon. Friend. It is therefore important that, as a Government, we continue to look at how we can improve the criminal justice system when dealing with such offences.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I join the Minister in thanking the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing this case forward. I am sure that he will have given his constituent enormous moral support and made her feel that, after a traumatic offence has been committed against her and she feels that the criminal justice system has failed her, she has at least had his full support as he has brought her case to the House. The points arising from her case are so important.

I warmly congratulate the Minister, who I am delighted to see in her new post as Solicitor General. She will take all of these issues forward. I know that her appointment, as well as her support for those in the criminal justice system who want and strive to improve it—particularly in the Crown Prosecution Service—will be welcomed. For my part, I will certainly do everything that I can to help her work.

The Solicitor General: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her comments. It is an honour to follow her in this role, albeit not immediately. She has done a significant amount of work on this matter and continues to do so. I very much look forward to working with her on this important area, which we as a Government want to improve.

It is important to understand the personal experiences of those who have gone through the process so that we can better make change. Although I hope that the constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow will feel that she has some level of personal support, I reiterate that, by coming forward and raising the issue, she has helped to improve the justice system more broadly.

We in Government take such issues extremely seriously. We have already committed to a number of measures, some of which I have had time to mention, some of which I have not. In March, as part of the violence against women and girls refresh, we started an end-to-end review of the criminal justice system response to rape and sexual offences cases, which is ongoing. Debates such as this and hearing personal experiences are so important because they feed into that process. I thank my right hon. Friend and his constituent for a further opportunity to debate this very important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
British Sign Language Users: Access to NHS Services

[JOAN RYAN in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible to people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The interpreters in the Chamber are using British Sign Language, and the debate will be broadcast on Parliament TV with live subtitles and British Sign Language interpretation.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to NHS services for British Sign Language users.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Ryan. I am pleased that we have the BSL interpreters here in the Chamber for the debate and that it will also be covered by simultaneous live BSL interpretation and subtitling on the parliamentlive.tv footage.

I have been trying to secure a debate on this important subject for several months, because for some time now I have been raising the issues with the Government and a number of other organisations. This afternoon’s debate is timely as well, taking place just days after Deaf Awareness Week, which was from 6 to 12 May. As I am sure hon. Members and the Minister are aware, Deaf Awareness Week aims to increase awareness and challenge perceptions of hearing loss and deafness, promote positive aspects of deafness, promote social inclusion and raise awareness of the huge range of organisations throughout the country that support deaf people and their family and friends. That includes the ITV SignPost team, which offers content production, access services and training from their base in Gateshead.

Sadly, given the subject of the debate, there appears to be no reference to Deaf Awareness Week on the websites of the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England or indeed the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department with overall responsibility for cross-Government disability issues. I am pleased that many local NHS organisations, including the Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, have marked Deaf Awareness Week. The key thrust of my argument, however, is that all public bodies should be aware of and provide for the needs of deaf people, including BSL users, not just one week of the year but 52 weeks of the year. As I will highlight, on far too many occasions that is certainly not happening.

According to the British Deaf Association, the UK has about 151,000 users of British Sign Language, of whom 87,000 are deaf. That first figure does not include professional BSL users, such as interpreters and translators, unless they use it at home. As the BDA has described:

“Sign languages are fully functional and expressive languages; at the same time they differ profoundly from spoken languages. BSL is a visual-gestural language with distinctive grammar using handshapes, facial expressions, gestures and body language to convey meaning.”

Like spoken languages, sign language is not international and is not derived from the spoken language of a country. For example, the UK, Ireland and the US all have entirely separate sign languages, despite speaking the language of English in common.

In 1988, the European Parliament passed a resolution on sign languages, proposing that every member state should recognise its own national sign language as the official language of deaf people in that country, which on 18 March 2003 the British Government did. In 2009, the UK Government went on to ratify the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which states that Governments must uphold rights by

“Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages...in official interactions...and...Recognising and promoting the use of sign languages.”

BSL, however, still does not have any legal or protected language status, despite many deaf organisations campaigning for that since the early 1980s. Back in 2014, the British Deaf Association published a detailed discussion paper and highlighted the

“policy apathy about the shocking levels of linguistic exclusion we face as individuals and as a community”,

and,

“the shocking extent to which Deaf people are denied their civil rights.”

The paper itself highlighted the good practice that takes place in Finland, New Zealand, Austria and Hungary and set out why our Equality Act 2010 was not working as intended for deaf people—an issue to which I will return. Of course, since that paper was published, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 has been passed, requiring the Scottish Government to create a BSL national plan for Scotland to set out their strategy for promoting BSL. That was produced in 2017. The Act also required all other listed bodies such as local authorities to establish their own BSL plans.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister whether her Government have made, or intend to make, any progress towards providing BSL with legal status on a UK-wide level. I recognise, however, that she might have difficulty in doing so, given that it remains somewhat unclear just who has overarching responsibility for promoting and protecting BSL within and across Government.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned the European Union, but another organisation in Europe, the Council of Europe, covers 47 countries. It has already looked at the issue and suggested that countries need to emphasise their BSL equivalents and undertake training to ensure that that is available. Has she seen that report, and does she think it is something that we might like to support?

Catherine McKinnell: It is an important report, obviously, but I am interested to hear whether the Government have considered it, what their response is and how that would fit with their overall requirements to better meet our obligations on such issues in this country.

In preparing for this afternoon’s debate, I of course looked back to the 30 November 2017 debate on deafness and hearing loss secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who is present in the Chamber today. In that debate, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health commented:

“It is not entirely clear to me which Department would lead on legal recognition of British Sign Language, which is the problem that so many people have referred to today. I am sympathetic to the calls for strengthening the role of British Sign Language. We want to see as many people trained and providing support as
possible. At this time, Her Majesty’s Government are not yet convinced that the way to achieve that is through legislation.”— [Official Report, 30 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 236WH.]

I therefore look forward to hearing from the Minister whether that position has changed. In the light of some of the issues to which I will refer, I hope it has.

For some time I have been working with a number of local deaf organisations on the significant challenges faced by far too many deaf people in accessing services, information and support. Those organisations include the Newcastle-based charity Becoming Visible, but also Deaflink North East, in particular since I attended a hustings that it organised for the local deaf community ahead of the 2015 general election. At the time, the overwhelming sense of frustration felt by many deaf people about continually having to demand, to challenge, or to fight to access even basic services that most of us take for granted was palpable.

Since then, I have worked to do what I can to make myself accessible to deaf people in Newcastle North as their Member of Parliament, including by launching a BSL section on my website with the support of Deaflink North East, to whom I am extremely grateful. The page includes a subtitled video of a person using BSL to explain, in accessible language, my role as a Member of Parliament, including the types of issues I can help constituents with. Perhaps most importantly, it also makes it clear that should any BSL user from Newcastle North wish to attend one of my surgeries, Parliament can fund a BSL interpreter to facilitate that. In response, the manager of Deaflink, Heidi Jobling, commented:

“We are really pleased that Catherine has taken this positive step towards including the BSL communities. It is so difficult for BSL users to access any type of service and to have our local MP leading the way sends out a clear message, not only to the BSL community but to other providers and organisations, that being accessible is important.”

But this is not about ticking a box and moving on. I hope it is a clear demonstration of my determination to improve accessibility for deaf people wherever I can, including through this debate.

To mark Deaf Awareness Week, the chief executive of the National Deaf Children’s Society wrote a blog entitled “Unsure How to Communicate With Deaf People? Here’s Some Advice”. It revealed the findings of her charity’s recent survey that more than half of British adults do not feel confident talking to deaf people, while one in five has been nervous when speaking to a deaf person, simply because they do not know what to do. The piece opened with a really powerful description:

“Imagine if you were with a group of friends and one of them said something funny, which you didn’t quite catch. Now imagine, while everyone else is laughing, you ask them to repeat it, only to be met with the response ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter.’ What if this happened to you again and again, in lots of different situations? For many deaf people, this is far from hypothetical; it’s real life.”

That scenario is had enough in social situations, but the constant inability to communicate or be communicated with in one’s own language—and therefore access timely, appropriate and important healthcare, support or information—is particularly serious, as it can be a matter of life or death.

My constituent Ellen O’Sullivan, who is deaf, recently contacted me about the tragic death of a young man from Essex, who ended his life last month. It is reported that, having been assessed as having severe mental health problems and requiring urgent attention, the man was referred to mainstream counselling with the provision of a BSL interpreter, instead of the specialist deaf-focused therapy requested by his GP. Following his death, the specialist counselling service Deaf4Deaf set up a crowdfunding page to establish the Daniel MJ Webster Deaf Mental Health fund, with a target of raising £50,000 to provide six emergency counselling sessions to 278 deaf people with severe mental ill health in the parts of England where the NHS does not fund that. Such support is vital because, as the crowdfunding page highlights:

“The NHS regions who do not offer BSL counsellors use an interpreter with a counsellor. In general hearing counsellors do not understand the specific issues faced by Deaf people.

Interpreted counselling involves a counsellor and interpreter in the room with the Deaf person as they talk about deeply personal issues. Many Deaf people give up after a few sessions because communication becomes difficult.

There is an increasing number of Deaf people asking for NHS funded Deaf focused BSL counselling, they report suicidal thoughts. Many of these people have tried interpreted counselling which was not suitable for them.”

The establishment of this fund in Daniel MJ Webster’s memory is extremely powerful, and it is highly relevant that I raise his case during Mental Health Awareness Week. Does the Minister seriously think it is acceptable that the crowdfunding campaign should have to take place?

On being informed that I had secured this debate, my constituent Ellen O’Sullivan took the trouble to share her wider concerns about access to NHS services for BSL users and to canvass the views of many of her deaf friends. I will share some of their experiences. One commented:

“I am trying to be independent but I am unable to do that because to make an appointment you have to ring up, which obviously I can’t do because I am deaf. So, I have to rely on my mother to ring them or make or cancel the appointment. The doctors do have a website to book an appointment online, but when I need to see a doctor as an emergency on the day, I can’t book an appointment online because the appointments are not available to book until after a week or two.

I do understand that the NHS are trying to save money but as a deaf person I think it is important that doctors and hospitals book an interpreter to be with a patient the whole time while they’re at hospital or the doctors, in case something happens. For example, my partner who is also deaf, had a nose operation. It was a day operation and the hospital only booked an interpreter for 2 hours, but he also needs an interpreter when he wakes up, so he knows what is happening.”

Another explained:

“I am sick of going to the doctor to make an appointment and when they send letters regarding the appointment and the dates I can’t make due to work, I have to get my Mam to ring them and rearrange the time or cancel. I would rather email or text because I hate bothering her to ring up all the time.”

Another of Ellen’s friends commented:

“I don’t want to ask my Mam to make an appointment when I’m 30, I would like to be independent now. We need an app for quick easy access to book GP appointments.”

Another stated:

“I was in hospital for an operation and when I woke up the nurse came up to me and was talking to me, so I told her I was deaf but she was still talking to me! The staff gave me paper and pencil after my operation but I couldn’t write because I was hooked up to drips. I need an interpreter with me all the time!”
Other concerns raised by Ellen and her friends include the use of BSL interpreters who are not fully qualified, and the constant stress and anxiety that deaf people feel before and during medical appointments because they do not know whether their communication needs will be met.

John Howell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent case. I wonder whether she is aware of a number of NHS trusts that have tried to get around the problem, initially at least, by having television screens showing a BSL interpreter who helps the patient to get their appointment. That is a very good start, but it illustrates her point that it is only the start, because the person needs to be there throughout the whole process. Is the hon. Lady aware of that experiment?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that I was about to make. I said that an app should be available for contacting a doctor’s surgery—I think most doctor’s surgeries would agree. We need to explore the use of technology to make accessing NHS services a reality for deaf people—texts, apps, Skype or FaceTime—and urgently to invest much more in making sure that where there are technological solutions, we harness them to their greatest effect as soon as possible. All NHS staff, whether administrative or medical, need to understand deaf people’s communication needs and NHS buildings must be accessible, with clear plain English signage. Those issues are reflected in the experience of many deaf people in my region.

The Newcastle-based charity Deaflink North East shared the recent outcomes of work that it is undertaking on behalf of Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to identify the issues and barriers that BSL users face, which Deaflink states are common right across the country. They include deaf people regularly being told to telephone to book a BSL interpreter; continually having to remind GPs and hospitals that they need a BSL interpreter and it not being clear whose responsibility it is to book one, despite their communication needs repeatedly being flagged; appointments not being long enough for BSL interpretation; interpreters not having appointments and people being sent home after waiting for a very long time; being asked to sign forms without fully understanding what they mean; being sent large amounts of complex pre and post-operation information, with only telephone numbers provided if they require further advice; staff being generally unaware about deaf people’s communication needs, such as that they need to look up when speaking or should not shout out a deaf person’s name when they are waiting in reception; and deaf people simply not understanding what treatment they are receiving and having no means of finding out, and the likelihood that they are, therefore, being treated without informed consent.

Those communication issues clearly become more frightening in an emergency situation. Last year, deaf blogger Liam O’Dell highlighted concerning findings from freedom of information requests he had made to hospital and ambulance trusts about the BSL interpretation services they provide—or, rather, often do not provide. His article opened:

“Distressed, in pain, in an unfamiliar environment with no means to communicate.

It’s a feeling of isolation one would usually associate with your typical horror movie, but if the right provisions aren’t in place, it can be a real-life nightmare for the 50,000 deaf people in the UK that use British Sign Language as their first language.”

Of course, this issue is by no means restricted to NHS services. The Minister may be aware that, in September last year, I wrote to the Minister for Disabled People after being contacted by Deaflink, which was due to lose its core funding from the Newcastle Gateshead clinical commissioning group in what appears to have been a cost-saving measure. I wrote to the Minister for Disabled People because I felt the wide-ranging concerns Deaflink had raised should be addressed by the Department with overall responsibility for cross-Government disability issues: the Department for Work and Pensions. However, my letter was transferred to the Department of Health and Social Care and then seemingly got lost. I received a response from the Minister in January. That again begs the question of which Department has specific responsibility for promoting BSL and standing up for its users. If the Minister is unable to provide an answer today, I suggest that the Government need urgently to resolve that.

Deaflink’s manager, Heidi Jobling, told me that after more than a decade of working with BSL communities in the north-east, she has seen “the statutory services available to BSL users getting progressively worse. There are always exceptions, but it is widely acknowledged that, when leaving school, the average reading age of a BSL user is 8-9 years old. The majority of the hearing world do not understand that many BSL users do not feel comfortable or able to communicate in written English. Lip reading is difficult, exhausting and at best about 50% accurate. Yet, these are the fall back communication methods when no interpreter is present.”

She went on to ask how BSL users are supposed to access public health information about things such as joining a gym, stopping smoking, joining a weight loss group, safe amounts of alcohol or preventing diabetes—or, indeed, about how BSL users can access the benefits system, which now is almost entirely online. I dealt with a case in which a leading high street optician did not provide or fund a BSL interpreter for a deaf constituent, believing that offering a double-length appointment and speaking more slowly would be sufficient.

The letter I received from Deaflink highlighted serious concerns about the impact of almost a decade of austerity on BSL users. For example, the adult services sensory team has closed, all BSL—using social workers have been removed, and support to the majority of BSL users has been withdrawn following punitive local authority funding cuts. Heidi Jobling concluded:

“I am writing because I am concerned that, in times of austerity, the needs of the BSL community are the easiest to overlook.”

I find that statement deeply depressing.

I am, of course, acutely aware that the enormous challenges BSL users face in accessing what most people would consider to be everyday services are not restricted to the public sector. Indeed, the Treasury Committee, of which I am a member, highlighted only this week the difficulties that far too many people with accessibility requirements face in engaging with financial institutions and services. That certainly includes BSL users. One of the recommendations we made in our report was that the Equality and Human Rights Commission needs more resources to enforce the Equality Act 2010.
That brings me to my final concern. In response to the concerns I raised on behalf of Deaflink, the Minister emphasised:

"NHS organisations should provide interpretation services to all patients requiring them, including users of BSL. Providing communication support to service users is driven by the requirement to comply with relevant legislation, including the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998, and supporting guidance. This makes it imperative for organisations to provide language and communications support to ensure that patients are able to communicate effectively and appropriately with clinicians and other health service professionals."

She went on to highlight that “non-compliant organisations risk complaints and legal challenges, as well as patient safety and other implications.”

Given all the concerns I have highlighted, does the Minister really think the current legislation is sufficient to ensure that BSL users have their communication needs met across the NHS, or will she consider introducing a BSL Act along the lines of the one in Scotland? Given the difficulties that BSL users have in accessing many NHS services in the first place, just how easy does she think it would be for them to make a complaint about those services or to find out anything about the complaints process?

The fact that Deaflink is undertaking the work I mentioned with the Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust and, to a lesser extent, the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Trust is really positive. Is the Minister confident that all NHS services are taking steps to conduct and then act on similar work, or will she ask NHS England to properly investigate the level of deaf awareness in those services and their accessibility for BSL users? I make a gentle plea to her not to make reference to those services and their accessibility for BSL users?

In conclusion, does the Minister really think it is appropriate to expect adult BSL users to have continually to rely on friends and family—often their parents—to access healthcare and treatment or to discuss private medical information? Is it really acceptable for BSL users to have continually to challenge, demand and fight for access to NHS services that most of us take for granted, or to face delays to their treatment because their communication needs simply have not been recognised and met? That is not a situation that any of us would tolerate, so why on earth should deaf people have to do so in 2019, almost a decade after the Equality Act became law?

2.57 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). I congratulate her on securing this important debate and commend her both for her role as a champion for deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens and for her excellent opening speech. I also thank the House authorities and technicians, and the interpreters—the signers—for their ongoing efforts to ensure that our proceedings are accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Having spoken recently to senior members of staff, I know that a number of initiatives are being explored, and I look forward to some really positive news very soon.

I am grateful to Action on Hearing Loss for its briefing, and to SignHealth. Action on Hearing Loss offers some top tips for GPs to improve access, such as providing a range of methods for people who are deaf to contact the surgery, providing deaf awareness training for practice staff, and ensuring that people who have hearing loss leave feedback about the quality of their care. It lists troubling statistics about the experience of deaf people at their local health centres. Some 57% of people who are deaf said they felt unclear about their health advice because a sign language interpreter was unavailable for their appointment. Only one in 10 deaf people surveyed had been asked about their communication needs, and two fifths said that staff at their GP surgery still call their name out when it is their turn to be seen. Those numbers indicate a serious lack of attention to deaf people’s needs. You probably know, Ms Ryan, that NHS England has set out an accessible information standard—a clear approach for improving the accessibility of NHS and adult social care services for people with disabilities and sensory loss. Will the Minister comment on how the standard could be better enforced among GP practices in England?

Other recommendations made by Action on Hearing Loss include: introducing loop systems in all GP surgeries; making BSL interpreters available, and allowing for extended appointments when they are needed; and making sure that staff have a good knowledge of the communication needs of people who are deaf or have hearing loss by annotating their medical records and files appropriately.

Action on Hearing Loss quotes from a recent NHS England study, which found that “deaf people’s health is poorer than that of the general population, with probable under diagnosis and under treatment of chronic conditions putting them at risk of preventable ill health.”

When it comes to mental health, the picture for deaf people is not encouraging. SignHealth reports that deaf people experience significant difficulty in accessing mental health services. deaf people continue to suffer from mental ill health in disproportionate numbers and, sadly, suicide is becoming more of a concern. SignHealth reports that several high-profile deaf men have died by suicide in the past few weeks. Clearly, deaf access to NHS services is a life-or-death issue that needs to be treated with the utmost urgency.

In conclusion, easily solvable problems continue to inhibit deaf people from accessing healthcare. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North pointed out, when deaf people want to see their GP, many have to walk to their surgery to make an appointment because there is often no other way for them to do so. When deaf people see their doctor, 80% want to use sign language but only 30% are given the chance to do so. Of the deaf people surveyed, 70% had not been to their GP recently although they had wanted to, mainly because no interpreter was offered.

On behalf of Action on Hearing Loss and SignHealth, and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, I will ask the Minister some questions. It is the first chance I have had to welcome her to her place; I wish her well in all her endeavours. Will the Department for Health and Social Care commit to monitoring performance against the accessible information standard? Will the Department publish performance results? Will the Department commit to providing funding to help with the standards requirements? Finally, will the Minister
make representations to the Minister for Disabled People about looking again at the steps that can be taken to improve the market for BSL interpretation?

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today and to help to represent the views of the deaf community. I hope the Minister can agree to their requests, and that we will start to see a positive change in the physical and mental health of deaf people in England. I look forward to the responses from the Front-Bench spokespeople, especially from the Minister.

3.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for her passionate contribution on behalf of those who use British Sign Language. I commend her for the steps she has taken in her constituency.

I must be honest and say that I do not know much about British Sign Language. The staff in my office are aware of it and we try to have someone available for people to communicate with in BSL, should they wish to; it is important that we as elected representatives provide that opportunity. While I do not have the ability, some of my staff have made it their business to be able to communicate with those who use BSL.

I am happy that my two granddaughters have both learned sign language—in a rudimentary way; not in totality—at school. They can sign their names, which is a small way of moving forward, among other things we can do. I will ask the Minister a question along those lines, but first let me say that I am pleased to see her in her place. She seems to be enjoying her new role, and we are pleased to see her there. The difference between my grandchildren and me highlights the need for young people to have basic skills to enable them to communicate with people who may need their help. It is important that our children have an opportunity to do that at an early stage.

Although we must take steps to address the interpreter system within the NHS, as mentioned by the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse and for Newcastle upon Tyne North, I sincerely believe that we also need to make BSL a staple of education, so that every child has a rudimentary understanding of sign language by the time they leave school. I know the Minister is not responsible for education—her role is big enough as it is—but will she communicate with the Department for Education and find out how that can be achieved? It is so important. Our children are often criticised for anti-social behaviour, but I believe our young people are a marvellous example of what the future can hold. Such small steps enable them to have compassion for other people. My boys were always interested in other people, and I am encouraged to know that my grandchildren are the same. If the new generation has an interest in others, that means a whole lot.

The media in Northern Ireland last year highlighted the case of a deaf lady who was going through treatment for cancer but who did not have an allocated interpreter for any of her appointments. I was shocked by the lack of signers available to NHS trusts in Northern Ireland. An article in the Belfast Telegraph outlined the issue and quoted Ann Owens from the charity Hands that Talk—a lovely name that sums up sign language. She spoke about the lack of signers available for short-notice requests:

“It can be difficult as you can need about two to three weeks’ notice sometimes, but if it’s an emergency there can be times when someone’s not available due to the shortage, including for A&E admissions.”

That is a critical point at which to have interpreters in place. She went on:

“There’s about 25 to 28 British Sign Language interpreters in Northern Ireland and only three Irish Sign Language interpreters, which would mainly be used in the Enniskillen area.”

That illustrates the issue that we want to highlight, and it shows the dearth of interpreters. We need to address that by recruiting more people who can give up their time, and who are paid to be available at short notice. Each trust must have a list of interpreters who can be available at short notice to step into A&E situations. Other Members have referred to this, but it is important to take steps to address the matter where it is at its most critical, which is usually in A&E or on the ward.

I do not want to be critical of nurses—that is not the purpose of this debate—but we need nurses who can communicate in sign language with those who require it. Last year, I was in hospital on three occasions, and I was asked to sign a document to give consent. Truthfully, I was in so much pain that I would have signed away my land and farm; just imagine what it would have been like if I could not understand what I was being told to do, because I was deaf. How difficult would it be for a deaf patient, lying in absolute agony, to be asked to sign something that they did not understand? That shows me how frightening it is for deaf people, and how important it is to have the right people in the right place at the right time.

When foreign nationals go to A&E, interpreters are sourced and money is paid out—rightly so; I support that 100%—and yet our own British deaf people are left out in the cold because of the lack of interpreters. It is not good enough to say that we do not have the signers. We know there is a problem, so let us train staff within the NHS to do the job. The hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North and for Poplar and Limehouse have referred to that, and I think others who speak will do the same. Let us put funding and courses in place to teach signing, to ensure that there is always someone on site who has at least a basic understanding of BSL. It is important to have someone with even a rudimentary knowledge of sign language to communicate. We know there is a problem, we have acknowledged our responsibility and now we must address it.

Although there are 11 million people with hearing loss in the United Kingdom, new research has revealed that a staggering 94% of Brits—I am one of them—know no more than two words of British Sign Language. That really has to change. We have to be more open and more capable of responding, especially in our Government Departments and most especially within the NHS. It is so important to address the issue in the NHS. I look forward to the plan of action to fund and recruit the necessary staff to do what is right for the deaf in our community. I look forward to the contributions of the shadow Ministers from the Scottish National party and the Labour party, but I especially look forward to the Minister’s response. We are very impressed by her so far, and there is no pressure on her.
3.11 pm

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this debate today following national Deaf Awareness Week. Her initiatives in Newcastle are very worthy; she clearly cares passionately. I add my congratulations to the thought given in having BSL interpreters and signers here today. That was really good thinking. As always, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other Members who have spoken today.

Every day, people with hearing loss get on with work and family life while dealing with all the challenges that that brings. It is difficult to imagine what it is like to cope with a job using public transport, as well as coping with shopping and meeting your child’s teacher, when basic communication, which the rest of us take for granted, does not come easily. Almost 9 million citizens in the UK, including 50,000 children and 758,000 people in Scotland, have some degree of hearing loss, as have I. At least 24,000 use British Sign Language as their main form of communication. They are a large and important part of our community, and they need us to be more aware.

Access to NHS services is an important improvement that we can make to the lives of those in our deaf community. To support people who use British Sign Language, as mentioned earlier, NHS Scotland has created information in BSL for a range of health topics, including accessing NHS services in Scotland.

Scotland was the first country in the UK to legislate for BSL to achieve legal status. The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament, promotes the use of British Sign Language and made provision for the preparation and publication of the British Sign Language national plan for Scotland, which we now have. The BSL national plan sets out 70 actions that Ministers will take to improve the lives of people who use sign language, backed by £1.3 million of public funding.

Under the plan, BSL users will have access to the information and services that they need to live active, healthy lives and to make informed choices at every stage of their lives. The national plan’s health, mental health and wellbeing actions include, among other things, publishing a schedule for making all screening and immunisation information accessible in BSL; increasing the availability of accurate and relevant health and social care information in BSL; developing a learning resource for health and social care staff to raise awareness of sign language and deaf culture; and working with partners to deliver and evaluate two training programmes aimed at supporting BSL English interpreters to work within the health sector, with a view to informing a longer-term approach.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has appointed a health improvement practitioner to support mental health in the deaf community, which will help raise mental health awareness and empower that community, allowing them better access to services. In the wider community within my own Falkirk constituency, I have surgeries every month at a wonderful place called the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, which is run by volunteers. I can recommend its coffee and square sausage. People with hearing loss are welcome to come along. Everyone is welcome, by the way, if they like square sausage.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister is not familiar with the concept of square sausage.

John McNally: Many people are not familiar with the concept of square sausage. I tried to introduce it some time ago when I first came down here; it was refused by the catering staff, but I shall redouble my efforts.

The centre is a place where people with hearing loss or visual difficulties can access quality services, advice and equipment that helps them to be as independent as possible. Practical support is there for the deaf community at all stages in their lives. In fact, my mother-in-law, Mrs Chalmers, and my own mother, Rosa, made use of the services in the not-too-distant past. Young people looking for work can access advice on job seeking and training. It is also a thriving social hub, holding a range of activities and giving folk a chance to chat, try new skills and have fun. It was the first of its kind in the UK and has proven to be an absolutely invaluable resource to the community.

As with all language skills, it is good to teach communication to the young. We see successful examples in some children’s television programmes, using a system of signs and symbols called Makaton. It is picked up by all young viewers, not just the deaf community. The more who know some of the skills, the better. It helps us talk to each other at the earliest stages.

I want to draw attention to the inspiring “I’d like to teach the world to sign”, an initiative known as Hands of the World, co-ordinated by the remarkable Sharon Tonner-Saunders of the University of Dundee. She brings music and sign language together across the globe. Some 40 countries are participating. It is a great example of horizontal communication integration, and I ask everyone to Google it and have a look.

The Scottish Government have a plan for primary schools called the 1+2 language plan, which requires every child of primary school age to have experience of their native language, whatever it may be, and, of two additional languages—they could be French, Mandarin or British Sign Language. The Scottish Qualifications Authority qualification in BSL is being developed and SCQF levels 5 and 6 will be available from autumn 2019. The UK Government have not yet committed to introducing a GCSE BSL qualification. Rather, they will consider introducing one before 2022, but we hope that action will be taken sooner.

We want to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work and visit. A start has been made, but the efforts must continue. I hope the same thing happens here in Westminster, so let us keep talking—and, of course, signing.

3.18 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Ryan, for your chairmanship of today’s important debate on an essential issue for our times. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for securing this debate and for her passionate speech and obvious commitment to acting on behalf of her own constituents and deaf people everywhere. She has inspired me to audit the provision in my constituency
to see what I can do to make things easier for the deaf. I want to say how pleased I am to see Parliament facilitating sign language and subtitles here today. I spoke to the Minister ahead of the debate and we agreed that it would be wonderful if such provision could be made available in every debate in this place.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I alluded to the fact that a lot of progress has been made behind the scenes. The authorities are working very hard to see whether provision can be made, as it is in other Parliaments around the world. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority gives financial support for tuition for MPs who want to learn BSL, so perhaps we can make colleagues more aware that that facility is available also.

Julie Cooper: That information is helpful. I am sure that a number of Members would like to take advantage of that and learn more, and perhaps make a commitment to becoming signers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) reminded us, two thirds of people with hearing loss have left their GP surgery feeling unclear about the health advice that has been provided. The scale of the problem is that there are 11 million people living with hearing loss. That is one in six of the population. The charity Action on Hearing Loss estimates that by 2035 15.6 million people will have some sort of impairment. It is time we took that seriously and focused our attention on solutions. It beggars belief that 40% of deaf people say that staff at their medical healthcare provider have called out their name to announce that it was their turn to be seen by a healthcare professional. It is hard to believe, but it happens all the time.

We have also heard about difficulty in making telephone applications. The Secretary of State is focusing on technology, and perhaps he might want to look at the request for an app to make emergency appointments for a deaf person. The Minister could advise him about it. Other issues include the fact that in trying to communicate on the telephone there is obviously no one to sign, and no opportunity to lip read. There can sometimes be difficulties with reading documents, because often when someone’s first language is sign language they fall behind with their reading level, which adds to the difficulties.

Those communication barriers mean that many people rely on friends and family members when navigating NHS services. We have heard about the challenges that someone experiencing hearing loss or deafness has in dealing with life in general, but none can be more important than those arising over health matters. When deaf people are forced to rely on family members, their independence is clearly compromised. Their confidence is undermined and their right to confidentiality is taken away. It is estimated that communication difficulties experienced by people with hearing loss cost the NHS an extra £76 million a year in additional, unnecessary GP visits. Those barriers may also deter some patients from seeking medical advice and attention, which could lead to their having more serious conditions and more expensive treatments—so the situation is not cost-effective, either.

Last year there was a BBC broadcast showing some distressing experiences of deaf people who were undergoing complex medical treatments for serious conditions, with no one to explain properly what was happening. The reporter concluded that deaf people were being left behind by the NHS and described a moving scene in which a patient undergoing complex investigations in connection with cancer treatment was absolutely terrified. There was no one there for them to talk to, although they felt extremely unwell and totally frightened. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) touched on that very point, which is a powerful one, about empathising—putting ourselves in the place of a deaf person and thinking what it might be like for them, given that such procedures can be frightening even when we are able to ask “What is that for?”, “How long will this go on?” and “What happens next?”

The issue could easily be addressed by the provision of trained interpreters with a full working knowledge of British Sign Language. BSL is a visual-gestural language that is the first or preferred language of many deaf people and has its own grammar and principles, which differ from English. The provision of British Sign Language interpreters would surely facilitate a kinder, more efficient, more cost-effective service. Members have mentioned that where such a service is provided it is done in a limited fashion. Someone who is in for five hours of medical treatment will be given an interpreter for only two; or the interpreter will not be there when they awaken after an anaesthetic. Clearly that is not good enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse talked about the mental health issues that deaf people face disproportionately. Is it any wonder, given the isolation forced on them?

The whole issue relies on the recognition that for many deaf people sign language is their first language. English is often their second language, so providing a British Sign Language interpreter is as important as providing an interpreter for a speaker of a foreign language. Surely the Government must recognise that access to a BSL interpreter should be not an optional extra but a fundamental right. More than that, not only is the lack of qualified British Sign Language interpreters discriminatory; it is putting the health and, in some cases, the lives of deaf people at risk.

Those who suffer with deafness or hearing impairment have a legal right to support. Since August 2016 all organisations that provide NHS care and/or publicly funded adult social care have been legally required to follow the accessible information standard. The standard sets out a specific, consistent approach to identifying, recording, flagging, sharing and meeting the information and communication support needs of patients with a disability, impairment or sensory loss. In addition, the Equality Act 2010—landmark legislation introduced by the last Labour Government—made provision for equality in all public services and made a specific demand for service providers to make reasonable adjustment to avoid substantial disadvantage. Offering the services of an interpreter is cited as an example. The failure to provide support and British Sign Language interpreters is not just undesirable: it is a breach of the law.

We understand that the Minister who is responding to the debate cannot tackle all the issues on her own, but if she has been as moved as the rest of us by some of the speeches we have heard, we ask her to offer a lead. We want her to liaise with her colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, and to talk to the Minister for Disabled People, Health
The Government consider that current legislation is sufficient—I will speak more about that issue—but the challenges raised by hon. Members today mean that I shall look carefully at what these obligations under existing legislation to individual NHS trusts. The issue of BSL as a language is probably a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport rather than the Department of Health and Social Care, but all Departments have a responsibility to create inclusive communities. I will take away the comments made by hon. Members and discuss them with ministerial colleagues in other Departments.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North brought up a distressing example of the gentleman in Essex, and mentioned issues of deafness and mental health—of course, we are thinking about mental health this week. The Government are committed to that issue, and addressing mental health is at the heart of the long-term plan. We are investing £2 billion over five years to improve mental health services, and NHS England commissioned specialist mental health services for deaf people, including in-patient and outreach services. The hon. Lady and the shadow Minister asked me to ask NHS England to look at health services for deaf people, and I am happy to raise those points and look at what the Care Quality Commission is doing. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse set me several challenges, and I will attempt to address the performance results later in my remarks. If I do not, I will be happy to talk to him after this debate or hold a meeting, and I would also be happy to speak to the Minister for Disabled People.

I was asked how we can help more people to know about British Sign Language—indeed, the hon. Gentleman mentioned that his grandchildren are learning it at school. The Department for Education has confirmed that it will begin working with experts to develop subject content for a British Sign Language GCSE, and that will be assessed against the rigorous subject content criteria that apply to all GCSEs. Ofqual will also need to consider the proposal against its assessment criteria. Schools have asked for a period of stability to provide them with a chance to embed the extensive reforms to GCSEs and A-levels, and in March last year, the Education Secretary confirmed that the Government will not introduce further reforms to GCSEs or A-levels beyond those committed to during this Parliament. However, if a British Sign Language GCSE can be developed in line with GCSE requirements, the Government will consider making an exception to their rule on stability, and introducing it this Parliament, and I hope hon. Members will be encouraged by that.

As hon. Members have said, British Sign Language is the primary form of communication for many deaf people and fundamental to the way that they communicate with their families and loved ones. I thank everybody—interpreters, teachers and users of BSL—for their work, which helps people with hearing impairments to lead fulfilling lives in our communities. About 24,000 people in the country have BSL as their first language, and it is essential that they can communicate with NHS staff and services to access the best possible healthcare.

This Government are committed to a truly world-class health service that must be equally available to all. People must be able to communicate their needs and access the information, advice and support that they
[Seema Kennedy]

need to complement the hands-on work of health professionals. Some people may need additional support or to be supported in a different way. We must take proactive steps to provide support for reasonable adjustments—hon. Members highlighted examples of where that is perhaps not happening, and I will take note of that.

Let me focus on the robust framework that we have in place to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to permit access to NHS services for those with hearing impairments and those who use BSL. Existing equality legislation means that employers, service providers and public bodies must provide services in BSL when it is reasonable for them to do so. That was underpinned by the Equality Act 2010, which places a duty on all public bodies to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people are not put at a disadvantage compared with those who live without a disability. Commissioners of NHS services must pay due regard to the needs of their population, including those living with a disability, when planning and commissioning services.

Service providers must consider what disabled people who use their services might need and make reasonable adjustments accordingly. That includes, where appropriate, access to BSL services. The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 further expand on how the NHS should implement the Equality Act and make reasonable adjustments. Such provisions help to ensure that people are treated at all times with the dignity and respect that they deserve. A key part of that is the accessible information standard, which is essential for an effective high-quality health service. It was introduced in 2015 and clarifies what health and care services must do under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments so that people with additional communication needs are not put at a disadvantage.

All organisations that provide NHS care or publicly funded adult social care are required to comply with the accessible information standard, which sets out how patients and service users—including carers, where appropriate—should receive information in a way that is accessible to them. The Care Quality Commission, which monitors how the standard is put into place, specifically highlights that that includes users of British Sign Language. One wonderful example of that is the fact that BSL users can use the NHS 111 BSL language service, which provides telephone advice on when to seek further medical help, advises on medication use and provides tips on self-care. BSL users can download an app that enables them to connect to an interpreter via a webcam, and the interpreter then relays the conversation to the 111 adviser. Such technology is a great passion of the Secretary of State, and I will take away the comments that have been raised about that during the debate.

For standards and duties to be effective, compliance must be monitored and action taken where needed. When it inspects a service, the CQC uses five steps to identify whether it is complying with the accessible information standard to ensure that people with disabilities can access health and care services. Those five steps focus on how services identify and assess needs and how they are planned, how services clearly record identified needs, what steps are in place as part of the assessment and care planning service, and how services flag information and communication needs and their records, given that the method used must make it possible for all staff to be quickly made aware of and work to meet those needs. Finally, the CQC assesses whether services meet an individual’s needs, ensuring that people receive information in a way that they understand. That might mean arranging communication support if people need it, and it could include access to a BSL interpreter or lip reader, or using a hearing aid.

Organisations are required to publish an accessible communications policy and establish a complaints process. It is important that organisations support users to provide feedback and help to improve those services. In 2017, NHS England led a post-implementation review of the accessible information standard, which provided an invaluable opportunity to assess its impact and ensure that it remains fit for purpose. Following the review, a revised specification was issued. Although there were no substantive amendments, there were changes to the definition of some terms, and clarification of requirements regarding the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and data sharing. The review showed that there was widespread support for the aims of the standard and that patients and carers were clear that receiving accessible information is essential if they are to receive high-quality, safe care.

More generally, there is an action plan on hearing loss, which sets out key objectives including prevention, early diagnosis, maximising independence—a point the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North made—and enabling people to take part in everyday activities, such as gaining access to work. There is already a commissioning framework published as part of the action plan, and a joint strategic needs assessment for local authorities and NHS commissioners is expected this summer.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published “Hearing loss in adults: assessment and management” in June 2018, which will form the basis of developing a quality standard for adult onset hearing loss that clinical commissioning groups can use to support commissioning. The action plan on hearing loss consortium is led by NHS England, which works with stakeholders across a system to tackle this important issue and galvanise action, given the rising prevalence of hearing loss.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I commend the framework document and the action plan published last year; the Department of Health got a lot of plaudits for putting in place a plan to ensure that that which everyone has been raising is delivered on the ground. I would be very grateful for reports on how well the Department is doing, on cross-government support, and on progress in the NHS, because what is on paper is very good and got huge support from the deaf and hard-of-hearing community last year.

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Once plans are put in place, it is important that we monitor them, assess them and review them. I am happy to ensure that the Department keeps lines of communication open with the hon. Gentleman and his group on this matter.

I hope that I have provided some reassurance that there is a robust legislative framework, standards that enact it and a monitoring regime in place. This debate has highlighted where we can sponsor greater responsiveness—I appreciate the important point that the hon. Gentleman...
in particular made about the market for interpreters. I take these concerns very seriously and I am committed to communicating with colleagues across Government. I will finish by thanking the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for highlighting such an important issue.

3.42 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I must begin by apologising for the fact that, in my enthusiasm to set out this debate at the beginning, I did not welcome the Minister to her new post or acknowledge that she has stepped in to this debate at short notice. It is often the way in Parliament, when two issues come up in two different places at the same time. I thank her for her response today.

I also thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, which has been incredibly constructive. It has highlighted that there is some good practice, but still a awful lot of work to do. I know that much of that work is taking place within the all-party parliamentary group, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on the tireless work that he and his group do on this matter.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his positive contribution to the debate and the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, who managed to get a reference to Lorne sausage into his remarkable contribution. I studied in Edinburgh, so I am very familiar with the square sausage concept.

In all seriousness, while the Minister has given some positive feedback, there is still a question about who in Government is responsible for this matter. Who is the champion within Government? Who will take this on? I have no doubt about the Minister’s sincerity in taking on the points raised in this debate, but it would be good to know who has responsibility in Government for delivering on this, and I would be grateful if we could get a clear answer to that from the Government in response to this debate.

I must also raise a concern with one of the statistics that the Minister used in her response. She referred to there being 24,000 people who have British Sign Language as their first language. That is a disputed figure because it comes from the 2011 census, in which British Sign Language users were not able to properly participate, due to their inability to access the census in the way that those not having British Sign Language as their first language were able to. Their figures for users of British Sign Language are that 50,000 people have it as their first language and that 87,000 people in total use it. I just put that on the record, because it affects a large number of people, not to mention their families and friends and those around them.

As we were talking, I was reminded of another experience that somebody told me about, which has driven a lot of my passion in this area. It was quite a disturbing story: a gentleman went to the hospital with his father as the interpreter for a medical consultation to get the results of some tests. When they received a diagnosis of cancer, the son was so upset by the news that he left the consultation room, because he could not interpret it for his father. That to me is unforgivable. It is not how our NHS services should be. I therefore implore the Minister to do everything she can to champion this issue, both in the Department of Health and Social Care and across Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to NHS services for British Sign Language users.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.
Licensing in Durham

[SIR CHRISTOPHER HOPE in the Chair]

4 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered licensing in Durham.

May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher? The Licensing Act 2003 replaced several more complex systems; and at the time, there were good reasons for introducing that legislation. A reduction in time-limited binge drinking and the staggering of leaving times to reduce public disorder were laudable aims, as was the inclusion of consideration of the impact on residents, but it is far from clear that the Act has withstood the test of time. It placed responsibility for licensing with local authorities and introduced four licensing objectives that all applicants must uphold: the protection of children from harm, the promotion of public safety, the prevention of crime and disorder, and the prevention of public nuisance. Licensing authorities were also required to produce a statement of licensing policy outlining their approach to promoting those objectives. However, even when, for a variety of reasons, the objectives are not being promoted by a local authority, the granting of licences seems to continue unabated.

I have been dealing with licensing in my constituency since 2006—just one year after the Act was implemented. I have held many public meetings on this matter, as the policy appears simply to allow more and more venues to open in what is a highly compact residential city as well as an historically important one. I have raised the matter with the council and previous Ministers on numerous occasions, but as one resident recently told me, “the town just seems saturated with drinking”.

To give a better understanding of the scale of the problem, I should explain that in a very small area in the city centre, there are 11 establishments open until 2 am, two to 2.30 am and four to 1 am, with a further 14 between 12 am and later. However, the new norm is 2 am, as the new developments that are planned for the city centre—the Riverwalk, which has almost been delivered, and Milburngate—despite not being open yet, have been granted licences to 2 am. There are constant applications for extensions to 4 am, and we are all questioning how long it will be before some of those are granted.

Durham County Council recently consulted on its statement of licensing policy, so I held another public meeting, in March this year, as it is obvious that the problem is getting worse. It became clear during the consultation with residents that the existing policy does not uphold the four licensing objectives. The policy rightly states that licensed premises may become a source of public nuisance, generating crime and disorder problems if they are not properly managed. It even acknowledges existing issues of crime and disorder by stating that evidence suggests that late-night alcohol-related crime and antisocial behaviour remains a problem in parts of the county and that the effect that any such disturbance may have is “a genuine matter to be considered when addressing the hours during which licensable activities may be undertaken.”

The publicly available crime statistics show that in Durham city, the three crimes most linked to alcohol consumption—public order offences, antisocial behaviour and violence—are clustered in two areas: North Road and Walkergate, an area that covers less than half a square kilometre. In fact, nearly 50% of reported crimes between March 2018 and February 2019 took place in those two areas. Both are saturated with bars and clubs that have late licences, and that concentration of recorded crimes is far above that for other town centres in the region.

The local authority’s current policy has simply failed to uphold public safety. In fact, the number of people leaving Walkergate and trying to get home creates such a problem that Durham County Council now closes a city centre street to traffic between 9 pm and 4 am on Friday and Saturday nights. That street is largely residential. How can that be acceptable for people who live or, heaven forbid, are trying to sleep in properties on that street?

Given the large concentration of students living in the city centre, there is a particular issue about how the licensing policy addresses their safety. Investigators are still looking into the tragic death of a student last year. However, we have no idea how, or whether at all, the council’s licensing policy will be changed to incorporate lessons learned from that investigation when it eventually reports.

“Prevention of public nuisance” is a broad term, covering among other things noise, disturbance and litter. It is clear from the feedback that I have received from residents over many years, and my own eyes and ears, that the policy is not working for the city centre. The noise created by people moving around the city in the early hours of the morning is extremely disruptive, and the condition of the marketplace, particularly on a Sunday morning, is horrendous, with large amounts of litter left uncollected and the city appearing dirty and unappealing.

The issue of public nuisance is experienced not just by those living in the immediate city centre, though. As Durham is a small city, many people make their way home on foot. The centre is surrounded by residential areas in all directions, so whichever direction in which people travel, there is disruption and noise for residents.

I do not think that the policy protects children from harm either. One message that I am consistently getting from residents and businesses is that disruption is starting earlier in the day, because of the increased number of stag and hen parties visiting Durham. In fact, Durham’s chamber of trade, in its submission to the council for the licensing review, says:

“The...aggressive, rowdy, noisy and often intimidating behaviour of afternoon binge drinkers in Durham is especially off-putting to vulnerable and younger people, parents...and children, or visitors to the city who are unprepared for the ‘wild west’ environment.”

During my most recent public meeting on this topic, the increase in rowdy behaviour during the day was raised again, with residents saying that it was “totally unsuitable for families”, “obscene” and “horrific” and that it often creates quite a hostile and unpleasant atmosphere.

Durham’s policy states:

“Licensing Services works almost exclusively with, through and for people.”
How is it that a policy that clearly states that has allowed Durham to become a place where people feel intimidated? Despite working on this issue for more than 10 years, I am being contacted more and more by residents for whom it is becoming unbearable. During the meeting earlier this year, one resident told me that he had taken to sleeping in the bathroom to get away from the noise. But actually, more and more residents are moving out of the city centre, and in the longer term that will be a disaster for the city. The issue is having an effect not just on residents and visitors, but on businesses. The chamber of trade goes on to say that it is having “a demonstrably negative impact upon city centre trade and employment.”

There is of course the option of adopting a cumulative impact policy to restrict licences. However, that relies on several things, not least the willingness of the licensing authorities to expend time and effort in gathering the evidence needed to adopt such a policy. Other local authorities do seem to use that option effectively, though. Cambridge City Council has put five separate such policies in place. In fact, Cambridge's most recent policy states:

“It is evident from the decrease in crime and incidents that current initiatives”,

through the cumulative impact assessment,

“are effective and are having a positive impact.”

Cheshire West and Chester Council has also taken steps to address this problem, with a cumulative impact policy covering the centre of Chester. In fact, the policy states that “because of the historic nature of…Chester and its population distribution, applicants for larger entertainment venues may find it easier to meet the requirements…by using areas outside the City Centre.”

However, despite many requests over the years for a specific city centre policy, huge amounts of communication from residents and evidence being submitted to it, Durham County Council has yet to introduce a single cumulative impact policy.

That leads on to my next point, which is the difficulty that residents have in engaging with the licensing system. Government guidance says that one of the aims of the Licensing Act 2003 is to encourage greater community involvement in licensing decisions. However, in Durham people are often simply unaware that such applications are being made until it is far too late to make a representation.

Some local authorities have introduced requirements for stronger community engagement, such as Lambeth Council, which requires applicants to canvass residents’ views before submitting an application, or Newcastle City Council, which allows residents to view the full details of a licensing application and comment online. In Durham, details of an application are available to view only in person, by appointment, and in one location in the whole county. How does that enable people to have a say?

These problems are exacerbated by the increasing use of temporary events notices by venues in the city centre. Existing legislation allows for a venue to apply for up to 15 TENs in a year, which has seen several venues in Durham, particularly in a cluster around Walkergate, open until 4 am. Because there are so many venues in Walkergate, that could mean many TENs in a year, with two or three a week.

What this all adds up to is a small, historic city, with a UNESCO world heritage site right at its centre, that has far too many licensed premises. Durham is not a big city like as Manchester or Birmingham, which can accommodate efforts to boost the evening economy; it is a small residential city and it needs a much better balanced licensing policy.

The statement of licensing policy that applies across a county the size of Durham does not appear to allow for the more detailed approach that is needed to address the specific issues in different communities. How can one licensing policy be adequate for rural towns and villages, as well as for a compact, saturated and busy city centre?

Just before I put some specific questions to the Minister, let me say that I am extremely proud of Durham. It is a beautiful city and I want people to come and enjoy it, whatever their age or background, but I also want residents to be able to enjoy it too. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how we can get a licensing policy that genuinely protects residents by allowing licensing hours to reflect local needs as well as visitor needs, and a licensing policy that does not put developing a night-time economy ahead of the quality of life for local residents.

We need a licensing Act that makes it easier to refuse late licensing hours and one that meets the needs of different communities. That also means reviewing the whole system of TENs and giving local people a greater say over licensing policy, not simply allowing their councillors to take on that role. Instead, there should be more thought about how local communities can have a much greater role in the licensing system, including consideration of how we can get a set of licensing policies in Durham that establishes a balance—allowing, obviously, a limited night-time economy, but also protecting the historic nature of the city and its many residents.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher.

I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this debate. In a previous life, I had the pleasure of being shadowed by her, and I know her to be a person of great integrity who is enormously proud of the City of Durham. If, as she has said, she has worked on this issue as a constituency MP for 10 years, that is because there is clearly an issue in the city. I am sure that she speaks for many of its residents in expressing concern about the impact of the licensing regime on that beautiful place.

The hon. Lady noted, as I do, that in February 2018 the city suffered the tragic death of Olivia Burt, who died outside a club in terrible circumstances, which are the subject of an investigation at the moment. I acknowledge that and place on the record our sympathy with her family and friends following that terrible event.

The hon. Lady is probing the application of the Licensing Act 2003. Given her experience, she knows as well as I do that the system we have set up means that decisions on local licensing policy and how the law is enforced are, quite rightly, matters for local authorities and the police. It does not take too much to read between the lines of her speech and realise that, frankly, her main beef is with Durham County Council rather than with the law as it stands and the actions of the Government.
Dr Blackman-Woods: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. At the end of my speech, I should perhaps have made it clear that one of my big asks is for us to try to understand how we can get Durham County Council to change its licensing policy massively during the course of the current review.

Mr Hurd: I think that was clear. I am sure that that message will get through loud and clear to the hon. Lady’s constituents, to residents and to the council through the attention that this debate will generate in her local area. The bottom line of her argument is that the current licensing policy does not comply with licensing objectives; she went through those objectives and made that argument. She also referred to other areas. She mentioned Newcastle, Cambridge, Chester and Lambeth, here in London, which are delivering, in her view, a better policy for their residents.

All that confirms my premise: that the problem in this case is not necessarily the law but the application of it. The central issue is the statement of licensing policy, which is now under consultation and review, as is required every five years. This is the moment for changing the policy and the statement, if they need to be changed, so I quite understand why the hon. Lady has brought this matter to the House.

The statement of licensing policy, which all areas are required to have, is a way to ensure that licensing authorities clearly set out their approach. If that requirement is not met, the five-year review gives a wide number of interested parties the opportunity to engage in the process of addressing shortcomings in the policy and contributing to the development of a stronger approach. I have referred to the recent consultation by Durham on its licensing policy, which I believe has now closed. Clearly, this is the opportunity to address some of the issues that have been raised today. As I have said, I am sure that the council will be aware of this debate and will listen to the hon. Lady closely.

The hon. Lady eloquently expressed some of the concerns that exist, not only among residents but in the local chamber of commerce, about the impact on the city centre. Of course she will also be aware that the night-time economy is real, valuable and important for the UK economy, although it is clearly in everyone’s interests for the industry to continue to promote responsible drinking and to educate its customers about the risks of alcohol abuse. The licensing system needs to try to strike the right balance between supporting a vibrant night-time economy and protecting the rights of residents and people’s quality of life in some of our city centres.

In relation to the Licensing Act 2003, the Government believe that measures to manage the sale and supply of alcohol, supported by strong local governance and accountability, strike the right balance. We do not see any argument for revisiting the Act, and I am not sure that is what the hon. Lady was arguing for. That Act, which is supported by detailed statutory guidance, is clear that the four licensing objectives that she went through must inform all decisions made by the licensing authority. As I said, the measures in place allow the development of vibrant night-time economies while ensuring that licensees give proper consideration to licensing objectives on the prevention of crime and disorder, the prevention of public nuisance, public safety, and the protection of children.

The 2003 Act is clear; we believe it has improved day-to-day co-ordination and co-operation within the various regulatory agencies, and between the regulators and the licensed trade. We believe that its key principles and objectives have endured, as its application in practice has proved capable of evolving and adapting to balance divergent interests. The House of Lords Select Committee that scrutinised the Act and heard evidence about it said that where the Act works, it works very well, so we believe that the measures we have in place can be effective when used appropriately. However, it is the contention of the hon. Lady that Durham County Council is not applying the Act in an appropriate way. As I said, the review and consultation on the statement of licensing policy is the key opportunity to change that.

Dr Blackman-Woods: In general, I am saying that the licensing policy of the county council needs to be massively changed, but there are two areas in which I thought the Minister might be able to help. The first is better guidance on how to ensure local people know about licensing issues and are involved with them, and the second is temporary event notices, which—as other Members have also said to me—seem to have got rather out of control.

Mr Hurd: I will certainly try to address both issues for the hon. Lady.

Late-night opening raises issues, tensions, and competing and sometimes conflicting interests between those who are out for a good time and those who want some peace. The Act abolished set licensing hours, so opening hours are now set locally. When late opening by particular premises leads to problems of crime, disorder or public nuisance, it is open to a responsible authority such as the police, the environmental health services, or any member of the public to seek a review of the premises’ licence. At review, the licensing committee may decide to amend that premises’ opening hours or to require other measures, such as door supervisors taking greater responsibility for the swift and peaceful dispersal of customers. For what it is worth, I remember visiting Newcastle last summer and going around the town centre with the police. The system that I viewed appeared to work extremely well in terms of co-ordination between the police and licensed bodies, all in the name of having a vibrant night-time economy while also protecting the interests of residents.

The hon. Lady asked me about temporary event notices, commonly known as TENs, which are intended to be a light-touch process. They allow licensable activities such as the sale of alcohol or regulated entertainment that are not authorised by a premises licence to be carried out. Licensed premises typically give a TEN to extend their hours on the occasion of an event of sporting or national significance, or when hosting a family celebration. It is worth noting that TENs are also valued by community groups, as one may be issued to allow, for example, the sale of alcohol at a fête taking place on unlicensed premises.

The Government are keen to remove unnecessary licensing burdens on businesses and other premises, to encourage economic activity and community cohesion. Changes introduced by the Deregulation Act 2015 increased the number of TENs that can be held each year from 12 to 15, to give greater flexibility. In 2017, the House of
Lords Select Committee on the Licensing Act recommended the introduction of a system for notifying local councillors and residents about TENs. In response, we have amended our statutory guidance to ask licensing authorities to consider making their register available online, or simply to provide details of TENs received on their website.

I do not think the hon. Member for City of Durham mentioned cumulative impact assessments, but they may be relevant in the context of this debate. A CIA may be considered in areas where there is evidence to show that the number or density of licensed premises is having a cumulative impact, leading to problems that are undermining the licensing objectives. In publishing a CIA, a licensing authority is setting down a strong statement of intent about its approach to considering applications for the grant or variation of premises licences in a specified area. The CIA does not, however, change the fundamental way in which licensing decisions are made. It is therefore open to the licensing authority to grant an application when it considers it appropriate, and when the applicant can demonstrate through its operating schedule that it would not be adding to the cumulative impact. However, CIAs are tools that are available.

The hon. Lady pressed me on the issue of public engagement with the licensing system, and I absolutely understand that point. The Government wish to encourage greater community involvement in licensing decisions. It is, of course, important that local residents are given the opportunity to have their say regarding licensing decisions that may affect them. In order to have their say, they need to be aware, which is why applications for a premises licence must be advertised in the local newspaper and on a notice outside the premises for 28 days. As I have already mentioned, many local authorities also post details of applications and notices on their websites.

From time to time, there have been calls for licensing authorities to be obliged to notify all residents within a certain radius when an application for a premises licence is made. It is our view that the present arrangements are sufficient, and that such a requirement would be both costly and unnecessary. The licensing authorities are, however, required to publish a statement of licensing policy every five years. As we have discussed, that seems to be at the heart of this debate; that is the major opportunity to change policy and change how the law is enacted in Durham.

I should point out to the hon. Lady that as part of our work as a Government, we have run two phases of what is called the local alcohol action areas programme; its second phase closed in January. That programme engaged directly with 32 local areas and provided support to implement plans to tackle alcohol-related issues. It appears to have been well received, and we are considering how we can build on that foundation for the third phase of the programme. It is quite possible that Durham could offer some valuable insight in those discussions, because one of the items we are considering is how licensing works in practice, and we will be looking to engage with a number of areas. Durham may be highly relevant in that third phase.

I spoke earlier about the Licensing Act achieving the right balance between the benefits of employment, profits for business and enjoyment for the public provided by a thriving night-time economy, and the need for licensed premises to operate responsibly to ensure public safety and avoid public nuisance. The Government believe that the Act strikes the right balance. When there are problems in the night-time economy relating to late-night opening or the number or density of premises, which I think is the hon. Lady’s point, the Act provides measures that can be used to tackle them.

To come back to my central point, the actions of the county council seem to be at the heart of this debate about the appropriateness of licensing policy in Durham. Those actions are embodied in the statement of licensing policy, which is up for its five-year review. That consultation, and the county council’s response to it, seem to be the key. By securing this debate, and by presenting her argument so eloquently, forcefully and passionately, I am sure that the hon. Lady has ensured that her message—which I know represents the views of many residents in Durham—will be heard loud and clear by the local authority.

Question put and agreed to.
Trophy Hunting

4.29 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered trophy hunting.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate about trophy hunting takes place within a much wider context. For example, we learned from a recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report published just a few days ago that humanity threatens a million species with extinction—species that cover the full range of biodiversity. Although extinctions have always occurred, the report makes it clear that we are witnessing a man-made tragedy on an unprecedented scale. Since 1970, the world’s human population has doubled. The global economy has quadrupled in size and international trade has grown tenfold, and yet as the human footprint has expanded, nature has suffered dramatically. In that same timeframe, we have lost half of the world’s wild animals. We continue to lose around 20 million hectares of forest a year. Only 13% of the world’s wetlands that existed in 1700 still survive today. A third of fish stocks are now harvested at unsustainable levels and live coral cover has more than halved. Perhaps most starkly of all, a quarter of all animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction. That is a rate of destruction hundreds of times higher than the average of the past 10 million years.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. The world’s pre-eminent experts have highlighted that we as humans have wiped out more than 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles just within the past 50 years, implying that the annihilation of wildlife is an emergency that threatens civilisation itself. On top of that, we have pathetic, reckless, foolish individuals engaged in trophy hunting. Does he agree that a lot more needs to be done by the Government to tackle the evil wildlife trade and to clamp down on trophy hunting? I hope we will hear some concrete measures from the Minister today.

Zac Goldsmith: I think that issue will be raised later in the debate. It is not an issue that I know a huge amount about, but from what I do know, I very much share the hon. Lady’s concerns, and I thank her for raising them.

On a personal level, I believe that shooting beautiful endangered wild animals purely for sport is barbaric and perverse. I think the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spoke for many when he said recently that he had an “emotional problem” with trophy hunting. It is no surprise that a poll found 93% of the public opposed to trophy hunting. Earlier this week, the Commons digital engagement team kindly asked members of the public for their views in advance of this debate, and there was a huge response. Many thousands of people responded and, unsurprisingly, the vast majority were opposed to the practice, describing it as “abhorrent,” “appalling”, “barbaric”, and more besides.

Members will remember the tragic story of Cecil the lion, a beautiful and much celebrated animal, shot dead by a trophy hunter in Zimbabwe in 2015. I remember feeling sickened by the sight of celebrity hunter Melissa Bachman gloating on Twitter and Facebook, smirking alongside dead bears, crocodiles, lions and so many other beautiful animals, but the issue goes far wider than the stories that occasionally make it into the mainstream media or even social media. A 2016 report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare revealed that as many as 1.7 million hunting trophies crossed borders between 2004 and 2014, at least 200,000 of which were from threatened species. The US accounts for a staggering 71% of them. In 2016, 1,193 trophies were taken from the most endangered species of all—those listed on appendix I of the convention on international trade in endangered species.
Some of those species are in real trouble. Wild lion numbers, for example, may now be as low as 15,000, which is a 43% decline in just 21 years. Only 415,000 African elephants remain, when there were more than 3 million a century ago. The black rhino population has recovered a bit, but there are still just 5,000. It therefore seems perverse that the hunting continues, and in many cases is all perfectly legal. We sometimes hear from the hunters when they are pushed, charged or challenged that they do it for the love of the animal or for the love of nature, but could anyone who loves and respects the noble lion or the gentle giraffe even entertain the idea of paying thousands of pounds to butcher them?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, will he clarify something for me? I am mystified as to why the UK Government’s position, according to the Secretary of State, is that the UK will not yet be banning imports from trophy hunting. That is the central point of the debate where I want to put my case. Will he explain why, but before I do, I will give way.

Having said what I have said about the moral conundrum or the moral case for or against trophy hunting, it is important for the sake of this debate—the Government certainly have to do this—to separate the moral arguments from the conservation arguments. Morally, the issue is largely black and white. We are either comfortable with endangered wild animals being killed for fun or we are not, but from a conservation point of view, I have to acknowledge, not least because I have just been in a big discussion with conservation groups arguing about the issue, that the issue is at least more nuanced than that. I will explain why, but before I do, I will give way.

Zac Goldsmith: I cannot speak for the Government, but I will attempt to answer that question in the remaining minutes of my speech. I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman and I are largely on the same page.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for what he does on conservation work across the world. We are much indebted to him for his leadership. He referred to conservation. When we have any conversations about animals or animal welfare, we must always be sure to discuss conservation, because it is so important. How can we do better at conserving wildlife and ensuring that the habitat is still there to sustain the animals? Some of the reasons for the decreasing numbers are habitat loss and poor management. He has secured this debate, and I know he wants to add hippopotamuses to the Ivory Act 2018. I fully support him in that.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point to habitat loss, which is the biggest cause of extinction. I have an idea—I will mention it right at the end of the debate, if that is okay—that would help to address that problem.

It would be wrong if I failed to acknowledge the live debate between experts, NGOs and even conservation charities about hunting. There are those who argue that it can contribute to conservation. Those in favour of trophy hunting say, for example, that it is not only compared to the threat of habitat loss, illegal poaching, human and animal conflict and so on, which contribute a great deal more to the decline in species, and that we should focus on them instead. The first part of that is true, but it does not strike me as an argument against taking action to tackle trophy hunting. We could say, I do not think we would, that we should not worry about deforestation because it is not as big a part of the climate change problem as transport, for instance.

Those in favour of trophy hunting also say that it can generate important revenue for deprived areas of the world—revenue that can be spent on preserving habitat and protecting endangered species more widely. That is an important argument, which needs to be examined properly. The problem—the Minister will probably make the same point—is that there is simply not enough evidence or data to back up that assertion. I am struck by the way in which pro-conservation arguments in favour of trophy hunting are always phrased. Trophy hunting is okay if it is properly regulated, if the fees go to local communities and if it is sustainable. I suspect that advocates of those arguments are arguing for something that, although it is undoubtedly done to a higher standard occasionally, just does not exist on a wide scale.

The Government use a similar argument. In explaining the Government’s position, Ministers have said that sustainable trophy hunting can play a part in species conservation efforts, including providing funding for conservation. I have three questions about that approach. First, are Ministers confident that the large fees charged for trophy hunting are actually being spent on conservation, rather than going to those organising the hunts? There is very little evidence that the money is genuinely reinvested in protecting habitats or helping local communities.

Secondly, do Ministers really believe that the money generated from hunting is preferable to the much larger sums that could be generated, where appropriate, from such things as wildlife tourism and sustainable land use? The Wildlife Trusts estimates that a live elephant is worth 76 times more than a dead elephant.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Is it not rather hard to create the right culture and educative environment if we say, “Oh yes, if you’re rich you can go and shoot a few elephants or whatever, but if you’re some poor poacher, that’s terrible—you mustn’t do that”? We have to say that it is completely unacceptable behaviour whether someone is rich or poor.

Zac Goldsmith: I share my right hon. and learned Friend’s view, and I will come to that shortly. I thank him for his intervention.

The third question for Ministers is: can we be confident that the legal hunting trade is not acting as a cover for the illegal trade in animal products, which the UK has been a world leader in fighting? We banned the legal ivory trade in the UK precisely because it often incentivised, and provided cover for, the illegal trade. Surely the same logic applies.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but, as he knows, I am about to go and give his apologies to IFAW for his absence from its celebrations. He mentioned the ban on the ivory trade—there is probably nobody in the Chamber who has not welcomed that—and he used the word “perverse” several times. Is it not perverse that although the Government have banned the ivory trade and justly claimed credit for doing so, they are permitting and
almost encouraging the killing of animals for trophies other than ivory, such as skins? Does it not make it even worse, and kick the bottom out of the conservation argument, that in South Africa lions are being bred as cubs to be released into the wild for no purpose other than to be shot? There is no conservation in that, is there?

Zac Goldsmith: My right hon. Friend is right that there is no conservation value in that whatever. Colleagues will raise that issue in more detail, but I will touch on it shortly.

My fear is that the existence of some small-scale examples of better practice is driving our policy generally on trophy hunting, without recourse to the wider evidence, which suggests that the real story of trophy hunting is a lot less rosy than those advocates would have us believe. Indeed, on almost every level there is reason to doubt the arguments in favour of trophy hunting.

When it comes to the claim that sustainable hunting supports local people, a report prepared for—the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which is the global authority on nature, said that hunting “serves individual interests, but not those of conservation, governments or local communities.”

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, around 97% of hunting revenues stay within the hunting industry. Incidentally, just 0.03% of African GDP derives from hunting, when the prospects for expanding tourism are clearly far greater, and likely far more profitable for local communities. Another report written for the IUCN noted that 40% of the big game hunting zones in Zambia, and 72% in Tanzania, are now classified as depleted because the big game has simply been hunted out of those areas.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest threats to some of those species is the growth of populations in continents such as Africa? Will he applaud work done by non-governmental organisations, such as one I have seen for myself at Amboseli, where IFAW has put people in place to co-ordinate the interface between wildlife and human beings, which has caused threats particularly to species such as lions? It is really important that that is where resources go.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more strongly. The best conservation projects harness the power of people at the grassroots—people who then directly benefit from an emerging economy in conservation. There are so many examples—not enough to buck the trends that I mentioned at the beginning, but some really inspiring ones that I could spend hours relating. However, I will not do that, as I am going to allow another intervention.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I have applied to speak, but in case there is not time, I could not let the point about Zambia go. I lived in that country many years ago, in the Luangwa Valley, which was a game reserve and which, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is now totally depleted of the richness that it had years ago. Does he agree that, were we to ban—as Ségolène Royal has done in France, and as has been done in Australia and the Netherlands—the importing of what are regarded as prize trophies, such a ban would deplete the hunger for trophies and their magical status? Perhaps other countries would follow suit, and the appetite for barbaric trophy hunting would begin to die down.

Zac Goldsmith: I strongly agree, and I will come to that. On the claims about the conservation value of trophy hunting, I will make one other point. The findings that I described were echoed by a US congressional report, which was damning in its conclusion. It stated: “Claiming that trophy hunting benefits imperiled species is significantly easier than finding evidence to substantiate it.” It added that “it is difficult to confidently conclude that any particular trophy import would enhance the survival of a species.”

There are other problems with trophy hunting. For instance, the idea that all the animals are killed quickly and cleanly is a myth. Cecil, the lion I mentioned earlier, took 11 hours to die, and it is reported that 50% of animals that are hunted are wounded rather than killed straight away. In addition, hunters invariably prize the rarer species, meaning that the most endangered species—lions, giraffes, elephants and so on—are disproportionately targeted. In addition to that, hunters prize the biggest and most impressive of those animals—the elephants with the largest tusks or lions with the largest manes. Trophy hunting therefore risks weakening the gene pool as well.

Finally, there is the revolting practice that has already been mentioned of canned hunting, in which animals are bred to be hunted and then shot like fish in a bowl. It has been widely covered recently in the UK press, thanks largely to investigative work by Lord Ashcroft. It is not reflective of all trophy hunting, but it is on the increase, especially with lion farms in South Africa. As well as the ethical horror of breeding animals simply to shoot them for fun, such farms supply the trade in lion bones, which in turn fuels, and provides cover for, illegal trade in the same products.

I received letters in the run-up to the debate saying that we must be conscious of so-called “conservation colonialism”. Clearly that is right, and I do not disagree with that. Whatever we think about trophy hunting, we cannot dictate laws for African countries. However, we can focus on our domestic responsibilities. Between 2007 and 2016, UK hunters brought home 2,638 trophies, of which 15% were from the most endangered species. The flow of trophy imports into the UK is increasing, with 12 times as many trophies taken between 2010 and 2017 as were taken in the decade from 1981 to 1990.

It seems particularly perverse, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) said, that even though we have taken a leading role in banning the ivory trade, elephants remain by far the most popular trophy of choice for British game hunters. Clearly, we cannot ban trophy hunting overseas, and it is not our place to do so, but we can reduce demand for it. Australia and France have banned the import of lion trophies, and the Netherlands has gone further and banned trophies from several threatened species.

I want the UK to take the lead and introduce a ban, or even, for now, a moratorium, on the import of hunting trophies, in particular from those species listed as threatened or endangered. My early-day motion 1829
calling for that has attracted the support of 166 colleagues, making it the third most signed early-day motion this Session.

In 2015, the then Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whom I am very pleased to see as the new Secretary of State for International Development, promised that “the Government will ban lion trophy imports by the end of 2017 unless there are improvements in the way hunting takes place in certain countries, judged against strict criteria.”

Is the Minister going to tell us that those improvements have been made? I cannot find any evidence of that whatever.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for whom I have huge admiration and respect, has explained his refusal to act immediately on trophy hunting by saying that he wants to be “cautious”. He is right to be cautious, and he is right that there is a genuine debate on the issue, but surely the cautious thing would be to introduce a moratorium on trophy imports now until robust scientific evidence shows that they are a clear net positive for conservation. We should also use our international role to argue for trophy hunting to be removed as an exception to trade under CITES appendix I, because it is absurd that CITES recognises species as endangered but permits trophy hunting as an exception to the ban on trading them.

I will finish where I began. Global nature is in crisis, and we must act. Banning imports of hunting trophies will not, on its own, save species; I have spoken before about the need to divert more of our aid spending towards protecting and restoring nature, not least as a means of tackling and alleviating poverty. However, by supporting trophy hunting and allowing its proceeds into the UK, we are actively supporting an activity whose conservation benefits are dubious at best. The evidence suggests that it is actually causing harm to endangered species and that its proceeds rarely, if ever, reach local communities.

I hope that the practice of trophy hunting will stop; I recognise that that will work only if it is replaced by other sources of income, which will not happen overnight, but we should be so much more ambitious for conservation. After all, is it not dispiriting to argue for conservation. After all, is it not dispiriting to argue for the need to divert more of our aid spending towards protecting and restoring nature, not least as a means of tackling and alleviating poverty.

Surely they are not preserved—they are stuffed.

Chris Evans: That is exactly the point: they are not preserved. Common sense dictates that if people go around shooting every animal in sight, there will soon be none left to kill, so there will be no trade anyway. What is the point?

The hon. Member for Richmond Park spoke about fantastic things that the Government have done with the Opposition’s wholehearted support, such as banning the ivory trade. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) pointed out, the essential question is why they have not banned trophy hunting. The hon. Member for Richmond Park has already cited the commitment that the International Development Secretary made as an Environment Minister in November 2015 that “the Government will ban lion trophy imports by the end of 2017”.

That has not happened.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park spoke about the death of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe in 2015. Australia, France and the Netherlands underlined their outrage by banning the import of lion trophies. At the time, the UK pledged to do the same “unless there are improvements in the way hunting takes place”. That has yet to happen.

I have been a Member of this House for nine years, and I know that a lot of people attack early-day motions as parliamentary graffiti or as a waste of time. In debates like this, however, I sometimes wish that the Government would take action on sensible early-day motions such as the hon. Gentleman’s, which “calls on the Government to commit to halting imports of hunting trophies”. The Government should adopt its eminently sensible suggestion “that nature tourism is a humane and more effective means of conserving wildlife and supporting local communities”.

Nature tourism is more accessible financially and for families. It has a wider pool of customers, clients and tourists, which means more money. It is also more sustainable, because it does not involve the threat that endangered species will eventually run out because they have all been killed. By supporting it, we could end the trophy hunting industry at a stroke, allowing animals to live out their lives and be observed from afar. It is more sustainable and long-lasting, as well as more educational and humane; it would be a more compassionate way of supporting rural communities.

The export and import of hunting trophies from endangered species must be licensed under the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora. CITES is implemented across the EU, but EU regulations go beyond its requirements. I did not want to mention the B-word, because I am sure that we are all fed up with it, but Brexit really is involved. The Government should look at what the EU is doing.
[Chris Evans]

In February 2016, it launched an action plan to tackle illegal wildlife trafficking, including 32 measures that must be carried out by 2020. Assuming that we have left the EU by 2020, will we still commit to that action plan?

I have known the Minister for a long time. I am not sure whether she remembers this, but many years ago she gave her maiden speech just before I gave mine. Since then, her career has flown up to the top, while mine—well, that is another story.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): You have a lovely wife, though.

Chris Evans: Thank you very much—I will pass that on to her tonight.

There are three main areas of the EU action plan that I hope the Minister will adopt:

“Prevent trafficking and reduce supply and demand of illegal wildlife products...Enhance implementation of existing rules and combat organised crime more effectively by increasing cooperation between competent enforcement agencies...Strengthen cooperation between source, destination and transit countries...and provide long term sources of income to rural communities living in wildlife-rich areas.”

Another issue that we have to look at is the involvement of criminal gangs. The trophy hunting trade is greatly abused, with gangs increasingly using the system to traffic wildlife and items such as rhino horns, which are fraudulently exported to places such as Vietnam. In its 2016 report on EU trade policy and the wildlife trade, the European Parliament’s Committee on International Trade found that most common offences relate to corruption, the fraudulent obtaining or forgery of licences, money laundering, and drug trafficking.

Simply put, trophy hunting brings misery to communities all over the world and should be stamped out. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs says that his ambition is to regulate wildlife as much as possible. However, between 2013 and 2017—under this Government’s watch—global trophy imports increased by 23%. Why anybody would want an animal on their wall or fur on their floor is beyond me, but in 2017 there were 16 recorded trophy imports to the UK—a reduction from the 46 in 2016. If there is not much appetite for trophies from the African continent to the UK. I hope the Minister will adopt:

“Prevent trafficking and reduce supply and demand of illegal wildlife products...Enhance implementation of existing rules and combat organised crime more effectively by increasing cooperation between competent enforcement agencies...Strengthen cooperation between source, destination and transit countries...and provide long term sources of income to rural communities living in wildlife-rich areas.”

On Saturday, I took my three-year-old son to Port Lympne, where the Aspinall Foundation is doing some amazing work. We got to see a little bit behind the scenes, including meeting—behind secure fencing, I hasten to add—two Barbary lions. One roared, and I could see the same awe in Freddie’s eyes that was in mine when I heard a different type of lion roar in Africa. However, the Barbary lion is extinct in the wild, and it suddenly became very clear that my son’s experience last weekend might be, if we are not careful, the closest he will come to seeing a lion if the current rate of hunting is allowed to continue. As the Aspinall Foundation says on its website:

“All subspecies of lion are now threatened in the wild mainly due to conflict with people.”

The Library’s briefing paper on trophy hunting from March 2017 talks about the “sport” of hunting lions. As someone with a clear interest in sport, I would say it is not a sport. I struggle to see the difference between illegal poachers, who hunt animals to sell valuable assets such as rhino tasks and who are rightly condemned by the majority of the world, and the privileged businesspeople from this country and others who travel to Africa and kill these beautiful creatures for their personal gratification. There is a clear difference between bringing a lion’s head home to place on the mantelpiece and real conservation of these animals. I believe that Government policy of carefully managed hunting playing a part in species preservation is disappointing, unfounded and potentially dangerous going forward.

The UK has a duty to support the establishment of new national parks, and the protection of existing ones, where lions and other animals can live freely without the threat of hunting or poaching. The tourism industry in such countries clearly relies on the visibility of these animals, so their numbers must be protected and increased through careful conservation, which would be of greater benefit to national economies than the money brought in by hunting. In fact, there are rather criminal figures showing that communities in sub-Saharan Africa that give up land to hunt, there is just 50 cents per head each year. Hunting areas provide just 37 cents per square kilometre to the Government of Tanzania, whereas maize cultivation can provide up to 25,000 per square kilometre. In fact, using land for hunting generates the least amount of money for Governments out of all forms of land use in Africa. It is clear that the past argument for hunting as providing support for conservation efforts is untrue, and many former parks where animals have been hunted to near extinction have become wildlife deserts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park noted.

I supported the Prime Minister on her visit to Africa last year, where she outlined her ambition for a closer relationship between Britain and African Commonwealth nations that would benefit both. This new relationship with Africa should have both cross-party and cross-departmental support, and the new International Development Secretary spoke recently of African prosperity and good, old British values such as humility and innovation. However, there is an opportunity in allowing this dated and inhumane trade in hunting trophies from the African continent to the UK.
The UK had an opportunity to be a global leader in preventing trophy hunting imports, a move that has overwhelming public support. Instead, we have sat on our hands while countries such as France and Australia have introduced outright bans and the USA has made it increasingly difficult to import by making individuals prove that the killing of the animal led to greater conservation of the species. Frankly, we should be ashamed of ourselves for missing out on the opportunity to take the lead. It does not mean that public pressure has disappeared: a petition by LionAid to ban lion trophy hunting imports into the UK has reached over 370,000 signatures and continues to accumulate further support. The disdain for stories of trophy hunting is real, and I hope the Minister recognises that there is public appetite for changing the law.

If anyone is in any doubt about why the Government’s current position is wrong, I encourage them to meet Peter and Christine from LionAid. Even without their briefing, and at a time when we have the opportunity in an ever-changing geopolitical world to showcase ourselves as animal welfare and environmental champions, we need to ask ourselves whether we in Britain want to allow trophies from hunting lions and other endangered species to adorn our walls as the only reminder for the next generation of what they could have seen if we, the current crop of politicians, had taken action.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We will start the wind-ups at 5.10 pm. I call Nadine Dorries.

5.4 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Chope. I had no intention of speaking today as I came to listen and learn, but I feel compelled to respond to the comments about Woburn Safari Park and make some other points. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is no longer in her place, but she said concerns were raised about Woburn. Woburn is in my constituency. As the local MP, I have not heard about or been contacted by email or in any other way about such concerns with Woburn Safari Park or Woburn Abbey Deer Park.

I am passionate about animal welfare, as anybody who follows me on Twitter or knows me will be aware. It was important to me that I got to know both the safari park and the staff who worked there, and that I did my own appraisal of the conditions the animals were kept in and how they lived. I am in awe of both the research and the conservation work that takes place at Woburn in order to contribute to the preservation of various species. In fact, at Woburn—if I had known I was going to speak about this today, I would have got a list before I came—there are not only endangered species, but species that are extinct in the wild, ranging from insects to big game and other animals. They are looked after incredibly well, so I support Woburn Safari Park in its work.

On the deer park and culling, I was reassured on Friday that deer have to be culled, because an old deer left to die in a pack in a park does not have a pleasant death. No deer takes longer than three seconds to die. They are shot, and a marksman rides on the wing with the person doing the shooting. If the deer is not shot instantly, a second shot is fired almost immediately. That has to happen.

I want to follow on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I lived in Zambia 35 years ago. I spent part of my time in the Luangwa Valley, which was a beautiful, rich and vibrant game reserve. People would walk instead of going in jeeps; I spent time there on walking safaris. I recently spoke to friends who live out there, in what was a beautiful, lush and incredible place. I will never forget being stuck on a riverbed when we were in a jeep and about to be chased by a bull elephant. I will never forget coming across a pride of lions at night, with a light and a halogen lamp. Slowly, one by one, little cubs came out from under the bushes, and the female lions licked them and patted them back into bed again. It was incredible to watch. The behaviour was so like our behaviour—the behaviour of a mother with her young replicated in those animals. It is so sad to hear that people are now going out there to trophy hunt and shoot those animals illegally.

I also wanted to make a point about what the Government should be doing about rhino horn. Anyone who has seen a rhino left for dead after having its horn removed by poachers will know it is a sight that cannot be unseen—it is there in our brains. We should be looking at how we can ban trophy hunting in this country. I see no reason why we cannot do that immediately, out of pure compassion and a desire to stop this behaviour from being normalised, and to prevent it from having any kind of credibility. By allowing it in this country, we almost give it a stamp of credibility. The UK is the fifth-richest nation in the world, and one of the most civilised. If we think it is okay, we rubber stamp trophy hunting. Surely we should dispel the impression that it is something we approve of. Out of compassion, if nothing else, why not ban it immediately in the UK?

We should be engaging with our international partners. Rhino horn, which has the same composition as compressed fingernails and toenails, is exported illegally to countries such as China and Vietnam. We should have conversations with our international partners and try our utmost to prevent them from claiming these awful, dreadful prizes and from believing that rhino horn possesses qualities that it does not. We cannot do that unless we take a stand.

Unless we say, “We ban the import of these trophies,” we cannot have those conversations with other countries and ask them to ban or limit the import of rhino horns, lion heads and other dreadful trophies.

5.10 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for securing the debate and for his thorough summary of this issue and the wider one of the risk of extinction. I agree with very much of what he said. He and others cited some sobering statistics, but one of the positive, encouraging stats was that 93% of the public oppose trophy hunting. That tells us that there is very little risk to banning it: the public would support it.

Across our nations, we are all animal lovers. I myself am a big cat fan; the pun is intended. I have a small—well, not so small—tabby cat who thinks he is a lion. If he saw the danger lions are in, he might change his mind.
The practice of trophy hunting is abhorrent to many, including me. I fail to see its attraction. It deprives endangered species of healthy individuals, and perhaps as many as half of the animals are wounded, rather than killed, with some taking days to die. In fact, I worry about the mindset of those who find pleasure in the practice. I just do not get it. I say that irrespective of whether it relates to endangered or non-protected species, and whether it takes place abroad or at home.

It is important that we do not confuse this issue with legitimate pest control, the management of habitats and conservation issues. The SNP takes the welfare of domestic and wild animals very seriously. We are committed to protecting the welfare of animals. Our manifesto promised to support more animal welfare measures with a global focus. My colleagues and I supported the passage of the Ivory Bill in the Commons, and we welcome the UK Government’s progress in tackling the illegal ivory trade. I hope we will see a total ban on ivory sales as a result.

The Scottish Government will continue to legislate to improve animal welfare and will establish a Scottish animal welfare commission to advise on the welfare of both wild and domestic animals, and how it should be improved. They will introduce new legislation and issue Scottish Government guidance. Last year, the First Minister noted concerns about the current rules, which permit the stalking and hunting of animals. She has confirmed that a review of current hunting laws will be carried out. The Scottish Government are therefore reviewing trophy hunting in Scotland and considering whether changes in the law are required.

Although there is much we can do in our nations, many of the endangered species under threat from trophy hunting are to be found abroad. In the European Parliament, Alyn Smith, who was our MEP and is heading up our list for Scotland at the moment, has been very active on this issue. He signed a letter to President Trump, expressing concern about the US Administration’s decision to lift the ban on elephant trophy imports from Zimbabwe.

A number of countries have introduced positive bans on trophy imports; Australia, the Netherlands and France have all banned lion trophy imports. I would welcome action from the UK Government on that and would certainly support such a move here.

It is estimated that there are now about 20,000 lions left in the wild, and some figures suggest far fewer; the hon. Member for Richmond Park suggested that it is 15,000. That certainly shows that we have a real problem. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) covered much of the lion issue. I will not repeat what she said—I agree with it entirely—but I want to highlight her point that all sub-species of lion are now threatened in the wild. That is a very sobering, frightening fact.

I am grateful to the briefing from LionAid, which was circulated in advance of this debate. It contains many good points in support of a ban on the import of lion trophies. I particularly agree that, at the very least, requiring evidence that an imported lion trophy has benefited conservation of the species and that hunting profits have benefited local communities would be desirable if a full ban is not introduced.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): Obviously, killing animals for sport is totally unacceptable. Does my hon. Friend agree that hunting lions does not benefit conservation in any way? That is the presumption of the recent change in US regulations. Why cannot the UK do exactly the same? If the US can do it, we should be able to.

Martyn Day: I agree entirely. Indeed, the US ban led to a reduction of 90% in imports of such trophies. We would all benefit from that. There is very little financial benefit from trophy hunting to local communities. The Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting has highlighted that it amounts to 0.3% of GDP in African nations, while photographic safaris generate 40 times as much. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke about the benefits of nature tourism. Those nations could gain much more financial benefit from that.

In conclusion, I hope the UK Government will consider a full ban on trophy hunting. I welcome the consensual nature of this debate, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing this debate. We have heard several useful interventions from Members of all parties—I would especially like to mention those of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson). Not only was my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) passionate, but he showed identifiable ways forward to help to bring this horrible trade to an end. We also heard passionate speeches from the hon. Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who exposed the spurious financial arguments for hunting.

When I spoke for Labour to support the Ivory Bill, which the Government were taking through the House, we debated the extent to which sales of old ivory could disguise the continuation of the slaughter of elephants in pursuit of the trade in ivory. Clearly, selling an ivory-handled hairbrush made in the 1950s would not in itself cause the death of any more elephants, but the very fact that the trade in ivory was still legal gave merchants dealing in fresh ivory a market for their goods. I am very pleased and proud of what this House decided to do, with unanimous, cross-party support.

Having taken such a firm line on the ivory trade, how can we possibly support the importation of hunting trophies, which can include parts of those self-same elephants? We have heard the appalling statistics from the hon. Member for Richmond Park: 1.7 million dead animals, or bits of dead animals, were imported over the previous decade, according to an International Fund for Animal Welfare report from 2016, including 10,000 elephants. Britain is one of the world’s 12 most prolific countries for killing lions and elephants, and bringing bits of their dead bodies back. Even with the National Rifle Association supporting international trophy hunters, the US does not allow the import of bits of dead elephants, but the UK does. The CITES statistics show a 23% increase in the number of trophies imported globally over the four years from 2013 to 2017, amounting to 20,846 in 2017 alone.
Imports of some trophies have reduced in recent years. The number of southern white rhinos shot for their trophies went down from 75 in 2016 to 72 in 2017, but that is probably because there are so few left to shoot. How can we be so concerned about the possible extinction of rhino and still let people go out with the intention of shooting them and return with a bit of the animal to prove their action?

The word “trophy” suggests that there was a contest, in which the brave hunter managed against the odds to defeat the ferocious beast against which he was pitted and took part of the animal to remind himself of his accomplishment. In reality, so-called canned lions are bred in enclosures and factory farmed, and then released to be shot like clay pigeons. Even if such blatant preparation were stopped, there is no genuine contest involved in trophy hunting; the activity is just plain slaughter.

When we debated the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill last week, I made the point that it is not the number of animals that is at issue, but the degrading treatment and the inhumanity of taking pleasure in making them perform. How much more cruel, pointless and inhumane is it for a person to go out to another country and deliberately kill an animal just so they can put a bit of its dead body on the wall of their house? In this case, it is about not just the inhumanity but the numbers. Of the 1.7 million so-called trophies taken over the past decade, 200,000 were from endangered species.

We do not have to allow this preposterous practice to go on just because it is allowed by CITES. CITES is clearly not adequate for the preservation of international wildlife. It allows trophy hunters to shoot even species listed as critically endangered. It would not be helpful for this country to withdraw from CITES, but it is time for us to join with other nations in creating a framework for the genuine protection of wildlife around the world.

Trophy hunting does not protect against poaching. There is good evidence that poachers use the activity of legally sanctioned hunters as smokescreen for their own killing. Permits for hunting have been used by poachers to trade rhino horns. Two-thirds of hunting trophy export records are inaccurate, and there is no reason to suppose that some are not being used to cover poaching. In any case, what difference does it make whether a species is wiped out by poachers or by trophy hunters?

Hunting does not support the economies of the world’s poorest countries in any meaningful way.Photographic safaris in African nations generate 40 times as much revenue as hunting, as revealed by this week’s report from the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting, which is based on United Nations figures. How much of that tourism income will be retained if all the animals that tourists come to see and photograph have been wiped out?

It is time for this country to act. Labour has already committed, in its animal welfare plan, to ending the import of all wild animal trophies from species classified as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and to extending that ban to species listed under CITES. There may be good grounds for going further and we would like to hear from those who think that we should explore that option.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Government plan, in the near future, a wide-ranging public consultation on trophy hunting and the import of wild animal parts, with the view to banning all imports of such trophies?

We cannot and must not allow the present situation to continue, and we cannot stand idly by while extraordinary and magnificent creatures are driven to extinction to satisfy the vanity and bloodlust of a tiny number of killers.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this important debate, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing it. I welcome the contributions that have been made.

I recognise that trophy hunting—some call it big game hunting—brings out strong and deeply held views and passions, as has been evident today. For many people, it is a straightforward ethical issue. Many people do not agree with any form of hunting or of killing animals in that way—by that, I mean not just fox hunting in this country, but deer stalking and shooting, which has been mentioned.

Although more people accept the need for culling to manage wildlife, it is not a simple issue and there is certainly no unified position among stakeholders. Many hon. Members will have received briefing packs from different stakeholders. We heard a lot today when we hosted a roundtable on this topic—my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park contributed—and listened to views to enhance our understanding and build on the available scientific evidence. I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that there were very different views on the evidence that was put forward, including a particular report, which he mentioned. An IUCN representative suggested that that was not their policy. We will get strong back and forth in discussions.

I assure Members that the Government take the conservation of species seriously. We should recognise that some countries see big game hunting as an effective conservation tool that can support local livelihoods and be an important source of funding to protect habitats and species, including those being hunted.

Various hon. Members referred to a statement made a couple of years ago by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). He commissioned a study into the impact of hunting on lions. That led to the report by Professor Macdonald of Oxford University called “Lion Conservation with Particular Respect to the Issue of Trophy Hunting”.

That report found little evidence of a negative effect on populations when the operation is sustainable, and found that game hunting can provide benefits to conservation as a financial incentive to protect lion habitats. A lot of the focus was on the practice of captivity breeding for hunting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park mentioned. When I was at CITES, I raised the issue of canned hunting and similar approaches with a South African Minister, and I raised trophy hunting with a Chinese Minister, so I can assure the House that we take those issues seriously. The report also highlights a risk that African nations who feel continually imposed upon may opt out of internationally important agreements such as CITES.

There has been a lot of discussion during this debate about species, and I will set out why we should treat countries individually, rather than considering Africa as
one nation. I am fully aware that elephants, lions and others do not know geographical boundaries, but different approaches have been taken and we work closely on those.

Our policy on imports starts from the point of EU regulations, which are considered by looking at both the species and the country. That is why there are different import restrictions on species by country or area. Trophies from hippos, for example, can be imported from Tanzania but not Mozambique, and at the moment, imports from Cameroon to the EU are suspended. A regional example is that trophies from African elephants in Tanzania can be imported to the EU only if they are from populations in set areas or reserves, such as the Serengeti. Currently, 10 species-country combinations have import suspensions at EU level, and there are numerous temporary import suspensions while additional evidence is gathered.

The EU wildlife trade regulations that implement CITES in the EU are directly applicable in the UK. When species are listed in annex A of those regulations, they require an import permit that will be issued only if a number of criteria are met, including a valid export permit from the relevant authorities of the exporting country. The applicant must provide that permit as documentary evidence that the specimens have been obtained in accordance with the legislation on the protection of that species from that country.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency is the licensing authority and it receives advice from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. APHA can refuse entry of the species listed in annex A, as well as of six species listed in annex B. APHA considers entry on a case-by-case basis with advice from the JNCC. On the status of big game imports to the UK in 2017, of the 63 permits requested, 44 were issued by the APHA and 41 were used.

Hon. Members referred to other countries. Australia has made probably the biggest change by making ineligible for import any animal that is listed in CITES appendix I, regardless of the country of origin. France has excluded specific parts of lions: heads, paws and skin. The Netherlands will no longer allow more than 200 species to enter the country. Interestingly, in a domestic situation, the Netherlands has a special place, Oostvaardersplassen, which is known as the Dutch Serengeti, where the policy was to allow nature to evolve. Unfortunately, that led to species starving to death, so while some aspects of culling wildlife may seem uncomfortable, it is sometimes necessary for animal welfare.

We have been discussing the legal wildlife trade, which understandably brings discomfort to many people, but, considering the wider perspective, the UK is showing global leadership in tackling the illegal wildlife trade. We will, of course, continue to take the actions to which the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) referred. In fact, we are looking right now for another EU member state to take up the championing that the UK has done on the issue in the European Union for many years.

As with the international wildlife trade conference in London last year, we will continue to work with many countries and partners around the world. That is essential to achieve real change. In Africa, the UK is committed to supporting action in the KAZA, or Kavango-Zambezi, region to tackle IWT and to enhance biodiversity and the habitats of the wonderful animals there, and I hope to attend a wildlife economy summit next month.

I am very conscious that people see CITES as a way to allow trade. At the most recent CITES, in 2016, we pushed for and were successful in getting tougher controls on species from appendices I and II. The JNCC is doing some work for us on some of these things and on where we could consider potentially taking more action. We do not intend to have a consultation, but we are seeking views and gathering evidence to further our understanding.

It will always be challenging when scientific evidence does not necessarily provide support, which is why this might well come down to being a straightforwardly moral or ethical issue. However, we need to consider the wider impact, recognising the conflict that can happen and the unfortunate developments in parts of some African countries, where increasingly—in human-elephant and, in particular, human-lion conflicts—we see animals being poisoned by local communities as they take away people's livelihoods or go into areas where people live. We are still gathering the evidence—we do not have it yet—and I am interested in working with others on that. I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park may wish to respond for the remaining 15 seconds or so.

5.29 pm

Zac Goldsmith: The Minister will not be able to answer now, but I hope that as she gathers the evidence, if it emerges—I believe it will—that the practice of trophy hunting has no net positive effect for conservation, the Government will take the firm position that I think pretty much everyone in the debate has demanded. I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and I thank LionAid, Born Free and the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting for all their work to raise the issue right up the political agenda, resulting in this debate and, I hope, more to come.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 May 2019

[SIR DAVID AMESS IN THE CHAIR]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks

1.30 pm

FIONA BRUCE (CONGLETON) (CON): I beg to move,

That this House has considered National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. This year, National Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week fall at the same time—this week. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing debate time to explore the connection between these two issues.

Increasingly, evidence is showing that mental health challenges are exacerbated when we experience relationship difficulties. There is a link between emotional health and wellbeing and mental health and wellbeing. As our most important and closest relationships are within our families, it is not surprising that when they are broken or dysfunctional, there is an increased likelihood of our mental health being affected. Evidence from a variety of sources, which I shall turn to shortly, increasingly demonstrates that.

However, the point of this debate is not just to draw the findings together, but to ask what the Government can do to address the matter through public policy decisions. We are suggesting not that the Government should tell people how to run their lives, but that a little bit of support—often it does not take much if it is provided early enough, whether that means early enough in life or early enough when relationship challenges occur—would help people to build stronger and more enduring relationships and, in turn, help to address the distressingly high level of mental health challenges in our country today, particularly among young people, reaping potentially lifelong benefits for them and benefits for wider society. That, of course, is a key thrust of “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which was launched a year and a half ago here in the House of Commons and which has the support of more than 60 Conservative MPs as well as colleagues from other parties. Some are here today, and I thank them for attending.

At this point, I want to thank the Government, because they increasingly recognise the importance of addressing these issues. They are, for example, addressing poorly functioning relationships through the troubled families programme. The Department for Work and Pensions publication from a couple of years ago entitled “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families” resulted in £39 million of funding for the reducing parental conflict programme, which focuses specifically on the couple relationship and on conflict that falls below the domestic violence and abuse threshold, but which means that parents need help to communicate and relate to each other. There is increasing recognition of the need to improve inter-parental relationships, as a primary influence on children’s long-term mental health and future life chances. I therefore welcome what is being done. Of course, it is geographically limited and, in terms of funding, will not reach all those who need the help and need it now.

It is also encouraging that the Government have committed some £90 million to addressing mental health problems in young people—probably, my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards tells me, with a particular view to providing mental health nurses in schools. However, the impact of that investment, as I have said to the Minister, will never be as it could be if those professionals worked not only with the children involved, but with their families. So often, the relationship issues within the home mean that families are the source of the mental health challenges that children bring into school. Unless the whole family are worked with, helping the child in school and then sending them back to the source of the challenges will never resolve the problem.

I want to divert for a few moments and commend a charity called Visyon, which it has been my privilege to be patron of for many years. A mental health charity based in my constituency of Congleton, it supports children and young people from the age of four when they have mental health challenges and it provides help right across Cheshire East and into north Staffordshire.

I am grateful to the chief executive for providing me with some pointers for today’s debate, which I shall summarise. The document states:

“The Government’s Green Paper, Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision, recognises the important role that the voluntary and charities sector will play in the formation and delivery of support to schools and colleges. With an ever increasing demand for specialist NHS mental health services for children and young people, it will be vital that schools are able to identify the most appropriate interventions or services to prevent the escalation into costly specialist provision, where possible.”

I shall refer to one area of intervention where the charity works as a priority, which is with parents, but first I shall give a few statistics from Visyon. It says that three in four mental illnesses start in childhood, 75% of young people with a mental health problem are not receiving treatment, and the average wait for effective treatment is 10 years. It also says that UK funding for mental illness research equates to just £8 per person, compared with £178 for cancer and £110 for dementia.

The document that I have from the charity states:

“Visyon’s approach is to look at mental health holistically and provide interventions that involve and impact on all aspects of the…young person’s life…When a young person is struggling with their mental health it has a huge impact on the whole family. Parents are often desperate to support their children but…end up feeling lost, isolated and under skilled…At Visyon we approach our mission to improve a child’s mental health in a holistic way…parents can be a child’s biggest resource.”

Visyon runs a “Parent Empower Hour” programme and states that in a recent evaluation of it, “parents were asked how family dynamics had changed since taking part in the group. Comments included ‘Our house is so much calmer. I feel less angry and overwhelmed’ and ‘I have found even ground now. I feel more in control and I know this is what my daughter needs’.

There is a conscious focus in Parent Empower Hour to encourage parents to look after their own wellbeing. This serves two purposes—it is important to model to children the importance of self-care and
it recognises the emotional toil of caring for children who are struggling with their mental health. One parent commented ‘I have learned to look after myself more and not feel guilty about it. This makes it easier to cope when difficult situations arise.’

It is encouraging that the Government recently launched their new relationships and sex education in schools curriculum, which requires an emphasis on building healthy relationships. The regulations recently passed by both Houses require that pupils learn about the nature of marriage and civil partnerships and their importance for family life and the bringing up of children; safety and forming and maintaining relationships; the characteristics of healthy relationships; and how relationships can affect physical and mental health and wellbeing.

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has made the points for me in his foreword to the documentation that launched this. In his foreword to the guidance, he says:

“In primary schools, we want the subjects to put in place the key building blocks of healthy, respectful relationships, focusing on family and friendships, in all contexts, including online. This will sit alongside the essential understanding of how to be healthy. At secondary, teaching will build on the knowledge acquired at primary and develop further pupils’ understanding of health…Teaching about mental wellbeing is central to these subjects, especially as a priority for parents is their children’s happiness.”

I welcome all that the Government are doing, because that work is crucial, but much more needs to be done. We need to recognise that, just as fractured family relationships can affect the emotional wellbeing and, in turn, the mental health of us all, the impact on the mental health of children growing up and experiencing poor or broken family relationships from an early age can be lifelong.

How can Government help people in the earliest stages of life? I will review a number of recent studies on this issue, not all of which come from organisations that have what might be called a vested interest in the subject. Relate—the relationship people—cites the Early Intervention Foundation’s statement that the inter-parental relationship is a “primary influence” on children’s life chances. In particular, frequent and intense unresolved inter-parental conflict is highlighted as a key factor affecting children’s long-term health and wellbeing.

A 2017 Office for National Statistics survey, no less, showed that children aged between two and 16 who are living in families that struggle to function well are more likely to have mental health challenges than are children from healthy, functioning families.

Interestingly, just today The Times has published details of the latest 2019 ONS survey, under the headline: “The key to happiness? Eat, drink—and be married”.

The article says that according to research published by the ONS just yesterday on relationships, married people gave the highest score when asked to rate their life satisfaction out of 10, as compared with those who are not married. Researchers looking at data from 2017-18 found that marital status has overtaken economic activity—for example, whether someone is in work—as the most important factor contributing to happiness after good health. That is good news in National Marriage Week, and from an unlikely source.

[© Fiona Bruce]

Research by the Marriage Foundation found that family breakdown also has a major impact on teenagers’ mental health. Although its statistics showed that one in five 14-year-olds with a mental health problem live in an intact married family, just under double that number—two in five of teenagers with mental health problems—were the children of parents who live apart and had never married.

The Marriage Foundation also recently conducted an evaluation of factors affecting teen mental health, using data from the millennium cohort study of young people who are now aged about 14 or a little older, who were born around the millennium. The Marriage Foundation report suggests that family breakdown is the biggest factor behind the UK’s child mental health crisis. Its analysis of almost 11,000 families found that having parents who split up was the strongest influence on girls’ mental health in their teenage years, with strong links to emotional problems. It was also the joint strongest factor, alongside relationship happiness, in teenage boys’ mental health, with strong links to behavioural problems.

ChildLine’s latest annual review cites family relationships as the second leading reason why children contacted the service to talk. The Samaritans says that divorce increases the risk of suicide, because the individual becomes disconnected from their domestic relationships and social norms, and that those who divorce may experience a deep sense of “emotional hurt”.

The Mental Health Foundation kindly provided me with a briefing for this debate, entitled, “Relationships in the 21st century: the forgotten foundation of mental health and wellbeing”. The Mental Health Foundation says that people who are more socially connected to family, friends or community have fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected. It also states that, as I have said, conflict within the family environment impacts negatively on the mental health of children within the family, and the negative effects can be felt across the whole of life’s course.

The Mental Health Foundation’s briefing says: “The family relationship environment in pregnancy, infancy and childhood is of fundamental importance to future mental health. This is only now starting to be fully appreciated as the neuroscience of brain development is becoming known and being seen to support understanding gained through observational studies of human beings and their mental health.”
In this respect, I commend the Leader of the House, because she has set up a working party of Ministers to look at helping families with children in their very earliest years—the first 1,001 days of life. This subject needs to be focused on more closely by Government, so I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend has done that and I look forward to reading her report, which will come out soon, about what Government can do to support those early days, although of course there is a lot more that needs to be done in later childhood, and indeed in adulthood.

The Relationships Alliance concludes that relationships are a vital public health concern, stating:

“Evidence shows that the quality of our couple and family relationships is linked directly to specific areas of public health concern. Such areas include cardiovascular disease, child poverty, alcohol/substance misuse, depression and mental health, obesity/child obesity, children’s mental health/cognitive development, and infant attachment.”

Of course, the first attachment that we make with others is with our parents; that relationship is one of the most important in all our lives. Positive and secure attachment is important for positive emotional and social development, with children being able to adjust better to adversity and change: to use a favoured word now, they are more “resilient”. By contrast, insecure and disordered attachment relationships in early childhood are associated with depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal tendencies and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other mental health problems.

Living with parents who divorce before their child is 18 has now been assessed as an adverse childhood experience, or ACE, for that child. Having one or more ACE increases the risk of a child experiencing depression, poor academic achievement, time in prison or sexual violence, among other negative outcomes. As the Mental Health Foundation says, toxic relationships and negative experiences can have a serious impact on a young person’s mental health.

We should bear it in mind that our children are growing up in a country that has one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the world; indeed, the UK now has the highest divorce rate in Europe, such that nearly half of all our teenagers do not live with both their parents. This is a massive issue, as we also know from those who work in schools, colleges and universities, where supporting young people with mental health challenges is now a major concern.

Why am I referring to all this during National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks? Because it is not just the quality of the parents’ relationship that matters; it is also being increasingly recognised that the stability of the parents’ relationship matters, if that relationship endures through a child’s childhood. That is important not only for the children, but for the adults within that relationship. As the Centre for Social Justice says:

“Family environment is crucial to children’s outcomes. It is the instability and disruption caused by family breakdown, coupled with poor parenting, that is so damaging to their outcomes.”

Therefore, one of the factors that promotes wellbeing is stability in family relationships, and all the evidence shows—we cannot avoid it—that marriage, as opposed to cohabitation, is much more likely to endure and to promote stability. Just one married couple in 11 splits up before a child’s fifth birthday, compared with one unmarried couple in three.

The CSJ produced a substantial new report just last month, entitled “Why Family Matters—A comprehensive analysis of the consequences of family breakdown”. Before I give Members the statistics, and people reject the comments made in that report as the mere opinions of those who have an interest in promoting such arguments, I will clarify the methodology that has been used. These statistics have been calculated using a sophisticated methodology known as logistic regression. I know; I had never heard of it before, either. That means that the influence of other demographic attributes such as gender, age, socioeconomic grade and ethnicity, as well as experience of social issues, are controlled for. The result is that the statistics arrived at are a true reflection, in this case, of the impact that family breakdown has on the life of a young person.

Here are some of the statistics that the report has produced: those who experience family breakdown when aged 18 or younger are over twice as likely to experience homelessness; twice as likely to be in trouble with the police or spend time in prison; almost twice as likely to experience educational under-achievement, not being with the other parent of their children, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy or mental health issues; and more likely to experience debt and living on benefits. Surely those statistics alone should persuade us that Government should be doing much more to address family breakdown. The cost of not doing so is too great, not just in financial terms—although that cost is huge, far more than the £51 billion often quoted for tackling these issues, which are the consequences of family breakdown—but, tragically, in terms of the lost life potential of the millions involved.

The CSJ states that one adult in 10 who experiences mental health issues says that family breakdown was a contributing factor. Put simply, the CSJ says:

“Marriage leads to the better mental health of children. Children of married parents are more likely to achieve at school, less likely to use drink and drugs and less likely to get involved in offending behaviour.”

Marriage reduces the risk of violence and abuse, and the CSJ states that marriage is more enduring and stable than just living together:

“Marriage is directly linked to better mental and physical health amongst adults; the same benefits are not found amongst co-habiting couples. It is specifically a marriage effect.”

This is very much a social justice issue. Better-off people get this; they get married in far greater numbers than poorer people. Poorer people do not marry as much, and therefore are the ones who badly experience the consequences of breakdown that I have described. That is not social justice, and it is a key reason that we need to address this issue.

Those tragic, heartrending consequences for millions of young people surely cry out for Government to prioritise supporting all of us to build healthy, close personal relationships, just as no one now blinks when Government recommend that we should eat healthier because our physical wellbeing is maintained and improved. The steps that we can learn for improving our close personal relationships are not that complicated—I will mention a few shortly—but the benefits we can all glean are unquantifiable. If we can strengthen our emotional wellbeing, we can help to protect our mental health. Not only children, but also adults in school who are learning through relationships and sex education, but all of us who are learning about relationships capability, would benefit.
The term “relationships capability” has been given to me, and very well promoted, by the organisation Soulmates Academy. About two weeks ago, its founders came to speak at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for strengthening couple relationships and reducing inter-parental conflict. That organisation says that we have ignored investing in relationships at our peril. It provides courses and helpful advice on relationships capability to individuals and groups, as well as corporate organisations, which increasingly understand the beneficial effect of relationships capacity on productivity. As Soulmates Academy says, building a stronger relationship need not be complicated; its relationship tips can be summarised as follows:

“BE CURIOUS, not critical... BE CAREFUL, not crushing... ASK, don’t assume...CONNECT, before you correct”.

I recommend its website for more information.

The Mental Health Foundation also provides tips for building and maintaining stronger relationships, which again can be summarised. It says that there are five things we can do: make more time to connect with our family; try to be present with them, not always on our phone; actively listen in a non-judgmental way; concentrate on the needs others are expressing; and express our own feelings honestly. It says:

“As a society and as individuals, we must urgently prioritise investing in building and maintaining good relationships and tackling the barriers to forming them. Failing to do so is equivalent to turning a blind eye to the impact of smoking and obesity on our health and wellbeing.”

People are with us. In a recent YouGov poll carried out for Relate, the relationships charity, no fewer than 99% of people agreed that strong and healthy couple relationships are important to a person’s physical and mental wellbeing—I am sure that any colleague in the House would love a poll that was 99% in their favour. That is why Government need to invest much more in helping all of us to develop our relationship capability. Supporting organisations such as Soulmates Academy to do so would be a good start during National Marriage Week. As that organisation says:

“If we agree that our committed, long-term personal relationships & marriages are actually what anchor us in life and allow us to go on to achieve our potential, what are we doing to invest in them and build skills to develop them?”

We need a national strategic approach to strengthening families. We have a dedicated Minister for loneliness; why not one for relationships? A coherent strategy across Departments, led by a dedicated Minister at Cabinet level, would be very helpful in ensuring that relationships capacity on productivity. As Soulmates Academy says, building a stronger relationship need not be complicated; its relationship tips can be summarised as follows:

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We need a national strategic approach to strengthening families. We have a dedicated Minister for loneliness; why not one for relationships? A coherent strategy across Departments, led by a dedicated Minister at Cabinet level, would be very helpful in ensuring that relationships and families were supported at all stages and ages in life, not just when they run into trouble.

Such a Cabinet Minister could promote all the other policies in the manifesto to strengthen families, including the development of family hubs in local communities where that kind of relationship help could be made available. I am pleased to say that those hubs are springing up in different areas across the country, and the launch of the family hubs network to connect the growing number of hubs in local authorities will happen in Parliament’s Jubilee Room on 5 June. I hope the Minister, all colleagues and all those who have come to listen to today’s debate will attend.
millennium cohort study data on 10,929 mothers with 14-year-old children reveals that mental health problems are especially prevalent among children whose parents split up. We have just finished the main inquiry on education in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Some of the figures on education in Northern Ireland are truly scary and worrying. We have the highest levels of anxiety and depression among children of primary school and secondary school age for the whole United Kingdom. That is very worrying. This debate is so important—the hon. Member for Congleton has referred to it—because it shows the importance of having a normal home life. I say that honestly, because having that does in some way help things.

It is incredibly difficult for a child to watch a break-up, and all too often they are in the middle. It happens so often. I thank every parent who makes the determination that, regardless of the relationship status, they will not allow their child to be a pawn or used as a weapon. A story came to my memory when I was sitting here. There was a sad, sad story last weekend in one of the papers. A mother and father were breaking up and they had two children from that relationship. The really sad thing was that neither the mother nor the father wanted custody of the children. I said to myself, “How sad is that?” Neither the mother nor the father felt that the children could be with them and they wanted the other one to have them. I do not know what the outcome of that will be. Sir David, you and I have talks about many things. You are chairing this sitting, so you are independent, but I know that you and I very much agree on the importance of married life and what it does for a relationship and the children that come out of it.

I have three sons from my relationship with Sandra. Two of them are married. The big fella, Jamie, has been married 11 years, and the second married just last year, and out of that comes the grandchildren. We could never get a wee girl—it was always wee boys—but Sandra always wanted a wee girl. She now has two wee granddaughters, Katie and Mia, and just before Christmas a third grandchild was born to my second son, who was married just last year—the product of that is a wee boy called Austin. How much do we as grandparents enjoy the grandchildren, ever mindful that at 7 o’clock at night we can give them back? That is a big, big thing. We get all the enjoyment, smiles and laughter, but when they get tantrum-y and want to go or argue, we can phone up to say, “They’re ready for going home.” That is always something to remember, but I say it because of the enjoyment they give to us as parents.

The findings show that the influence of family behaviour on teenage mental health extends far beyond parental conflict. Family breakdown is the single biggest factor for girls and equal top influence for boys, along with parental relationship happiness. Whether parents are married and happy, and stay together and remain close to their child, all make a unique contribution. I believe that parents have a strong responsibility; they need to be reminded that children watch and note their every word, action and deed. Therefore, the role of the parent is critical in setting an example for children in how the family gets on together.

The positive effect of marriage on mental health is clear and there for all to see. It is particularly interesting that the Marriage Foundation study showed that the effect of marriage extends well beyond stability and selection effects. For boys, whether their parents were married when they were born remains one of the two biggest influences on their subsequent overall mental health, even after taking into account their mother’s age, education, ethnicity and relationship happiness when the child was born, and whether the parents stay together. We cannot ignore—and nor can parents—the influence that parents have on their children.

The 2016 report by the Marriage Foundation found evidence that marriage boosts self-esteem for boys and girls. It is good that that happens. The report relied on the data of 3,822 children from the British household panel survey. It revealed that teenage boys living with continuously married parents have the highest self-esteem, while teenage girls living with continuously cohabiting parents have the lowest. The data outlines that the mother’s education has a smaller effect on self-esteem, while the child’s age and the mother’s income have no effect at all. Some of those stats are particularly illuminating because they give an idea of how what happens in the family home can affect children. Although those differences are all relatively small, they are highly significant and provide robust evidence that the wellbeing of teenagers and their future life chances are influenced by whether or not their parents are married. I am not making it up—the stats come from organisations, and they cannot be ignored.

Teens of either sex who live with continuously married parents have higher self-esteem and acceptance than those who live with continuously cohabiting parents or other family types. In outlining all this, I must be very clear: I do not believe that if a family is not united by marriage, a bad outcome is predetermined—it is not; far from it—but I am referring to the findings and how the information was collated. Data shows that children from married families show a higher level of wellbeing and mental health. That should be noted and highlighted.

The institution of marriage, to which I happily subscribe, has stood the test of time, and its benefits to society are clear. I believe that the House must acknowledge that, has stood the test of time, and its benefits to society are clear. I believe that the House must acknowledge that, which is why I am so happy to support my friend, the hon. Member for Congleton, and I thank her for allowing us to highlight that wonderful institution once more. I am someone who is convinced of the benefits of marriage, and in June, my 32 years of marriage will be an example of just that.

2.9 pm

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friends—they are my friends—the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on two excellent speeches. It is very good to see the Minister, who I know takes this area seriously. She has responded to other debates of this nature in Westminster Hall, and is a deep and serious thinker on these issues. We are lucky to have her responding to today’s debate.

The debate quite properly has marriage in its title, because it is National Marriage Week, and mental health, but every single Member in the Chamber, myself included, is here for every type of family. We are here for every one of our constituents, whether they are married, single, cohabiting, widowed or divorced—whatever their state. It is important to put that on the record, because occasionally such debates, and this issue, can end up in an unnecessary culture war. That is not necessary.
We have moved on. As MPs, we are for absolutely everyone. However, it is also right that at least once a year we come to the important issue of marriage.

On the cross-party consensus, I was really encouraged, as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary assyntary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, that I, as a Conservative, could sit down recently with a Labour Front Bencher and a Liberal Democrat MP. The three of us, from different parties and traditions, were united in wanting to do more to promote couple stability, because we understand the links with inequality and poverty. I think all three of us would describe ourselves as true social justice warriors, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. It is really important to put that on the record.

In 2016, 47% of all children in single-parent families were living in poverty. Frighteningly, the Resolution Foundation recently predicted that children in single-parent families will make up two thirds of all children living in poverty. Like every Member in the Chamber, I came into this House to eradicate poverty. That is the heart of what our politics are about. If children grow up in poverty, they do not have the life chances that we all want for them. They cannot make the most of their God-given gifts in terms of their education, career and contribution to their community.

I will focus on why this issue matters to Members in every party—the Scottish National party, the Democratic Unionist party, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives. I want us all to be united on this. We need to get behind the family/relationship aspect of poverty if we are serious about engaging with social justice issues and tackling poverty.

Given the fairly terrifying figures—currently, 47% of children in single-parent families are in poverty, which is predicted by the Resolution Foundation to rise to two thirds—we know that we want to try to keep mum and dad together in order to keep children out of poverty. Why, however, does marriage matter, and why have a debate on it? Is it not just another structure among many?

It matters for this reason: sadly, unmarried couples are six times more likely to break up before their child’s fifth birthday. If we are all on the same page in wanting to tackle poverty and reach a serious, evidence-based recognition of the fact that family breakdown, and the increasing numbers of children in single-parent families, is a major contributor to child poverty, we need to look at the type of relationships that will give our children the best chance of not growing up in poverty.

At this point, there is always a bit of challenge in the argument. “Okay, those are the facts,” people say, “but is that correlation or causation?” In other words, do a particular type of people decide to marry, which is why fewer of them are in poverty? I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton that we should dig into the data and compare like for like—people living in the same circumstances. I am absolutely assured by the researchers I have spoken to over the years that marriage still has a protective effect against child poverty in low-income communities, which many single-parent families live alongside.

That, in essence, is why marriage matters. If people accept my argument as I have laid it out so far, we need to be concerned about a number of facts. First, the marriage rate itself is in free fall; the figures show that it is really declining. As I said, I am genuinely delighted that today’s Minister will respond, because I know that she cares about this issue. I suspect that she was asked to reply to the debate because of the mental health part of the title. Had the debate been just on marriage, I wonder which Minister the Government would have put forward. I hope that it would have been her; perhaps it would have been someone else.

We might have had the new Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), as family policy is currently centred in that Department. However, if we are a Government and a Parliament that is four-square behind bearing down on child poverty, this issue needs to be at the heart of Government policy, not tucked away in one or two Departments. To my mind, it should be in the Cabinet Office, and there should be regular accountability through the Cabinet Office of all Government Departments on what they are doing in this area.

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that the marriage rate is in free fall. However, it is even worse than that because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, marriage rates among the better-off are holding up quite well. A company director or university lecturer is 48% more likely to be married than a building worker or office cleaner, and that gap is growing. In 2000, the gap was only 22%. Basically, marriage is almost completely disappearing from low-income communities. We have to call a spade a spade and recognise that fact.

I am really pleased that there are Labour Front Benchers who understand that fact and are concerned about it, because if we are to bear down on child poverty, we have to use every tool in the kitbag. Certainly, the Government, the welfare system, schools, youth clubs, community groups, the voluntary sector, the health service and all manner of different central Government and local government institutions have a role. However, we cannot ignore what is happening in our families up and down the country if we are really serious about this issue. The Marriage Foundation tells us, in a similar statistic put another way, that 87% of mothers from high-income groups get married, as opposed to only 24% from the lowest-income groups. We have to do something about that.

I am grateful to Tavistock Relationships for the briefing that it gave me for the debate. Its representatives sent me some research from Paul Amato, who they say is generally recognised as one of “the world’s leading researcher on marital quality, divorce, and other family related issues”.

His research has shown that common mental health problems are much more prevalent in people who are experiencing relationship distress than those who are happier in their relationships”. He warned against viewing marriage and cohabitation as interchangeable, stating that “we should consider the fact that cohabitations are less stable than marriages”, as I pointed out a moment ago.

Tavistock Relationships has a particular ask of the Department of Health and Social Care, because it believes that the huge overlap between relationship distress and depression is being largely ignored by the NHS. It points out that within the excellent IAPT—
improving access to psychological therapies—programme, only 49% of the relevant NHS services provide couples therapy for depression. It is calling for that figure to be increased to at least 90%, although it would be best if couples therapy were universally available. I ask the Minister to take that point back to her Department.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the hon. Member for Strangford, I pay tribute to the many organisations up and down the country that are working hard to strengthen relationship quality and provide relationship support and education. They should be much more prominent in our national life and much better known in Whitehall and Westminster.

In no particular order, let me mention the four organisations that make up the Relationships Alliance: Relate, which is perhaps the best known and the largest, Tavistock Relationships, which I have already mentioned, Marriage Care and OnePlusOne. They are fantastic organisations and are at the front and centre of dealing with these issues and providing support day in, day out. In my view, they need to play a more prominent role in our national life in the fight against child poverty, because they are absolutely part of the solution.

I would like to mention the work of Nicky and Sila Lee, who run the marriage preparation course and the marriage course. I will also namecheck Jonathan and Andrea Taylor-Cummings of Soulmates Academy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned. I commend them for their recent TED talk on this important subject and for their excellent work, particularly with employers. Many employers are beginning to realise that there is not a watertight seal between what happens at home and at work. Relationship distress and emotional distress at home have an unquestionable impact on performance and productivity at work.

We need the private sector to get a bit more engaged in the issue, because it is not just about the Government. Everyone always asks the Government to do everything, and while the Government have a role, employers and those in the private sector need to get with the programme and realise that they have a role to play too, alongside the community and the voluntary sector.

I will make a silly analogy that some colleagues will have heard before. I would guess that most of us in this Chamber own a car. It is the law that every year we have to give that car an MOT. We spend time and money taking it to the garage and having someone check under the bonnet so that the car is serviceable to go back on the road for another safe year’s motoring, which is the object of the exercise—and quite right, too. Should not our relationships and marriages have the same treatment? Are they not just as important?

I use the phrase “marriage MOT” or “relationship MOT”. Some people may have done a little preparation before getting married, but will that last a lifetime? In my own marriage, I have got into bad habits and have had to be corrected by my wife or by good friends. I have gone on marriage MOTs from time to time with my wife and with other couples, and have found them helpful. We should try to make that more normal and mainstream. It is not just about therapy, but about something that all of us need: a little advice and assistance to get out of bad habits and maintain good ones. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for mentioning some of the practical things that are involved.

Research shows that the No. 1 reason why children present at child and adolescent mental health services is family relationship issues at home. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the huge growth—the epidemic—in children’s mental health issues, which can extend until they are university students. Recent studies have shown that a quarter of all young women at university and in their early 20s experience some form of mental health issue. Very often, family relationships are at the core of those issues.

I will conclude with a quotation from an excellent article by Ed West that appeared in The Spectator in December 2017. The Spectator is not a magazine that I read very regularly, but I commend the article to anyone who is interested. I will read out his final paragraph, because I found it so striking. On the subject of marriage, he writes:

“How much does the government care? The answer is not very much. About a decade ago, David Cameron said he’d be the most pro-marriage leader the Tories have had in his lifetime, but his enthusiasm cooled quickly.”

Actually, I think that the last Prime Minister did some good things in the area. I would have liked him to do more, but I think that that criticism is a little harsh. The article continues:

“Jeremy Corbyn is unlikely to be talking about family values, which is a shame because a true social justice warrior would be obsessed with this issue. Marriage is becoming a luxury item, a trend that is likely to cause ever-increasing inequality down the generations. Any government that is genuinely concerned about helping those at the bottom should think about what it could do to make marriage for the many, not the few”

and a phrase that perhaps the Labour party could think about. I think that those are powerful words on which to conclude my speech.

2.26 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In some respects, it is nice to have a slightly relaxed atmosphere in Westminster Hall, because that gives us the opportunity to consider issues in detail. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. It is a happy coincidence of the calendar that Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week have fallen on the same dates, because that allows us to consider how marriage and mental health relate to each other. We should also note the general importance of awareness weeks and the work of the organisations that support them, because they give us an opportunity to raise issues in the House and press the Government on their commitments.

I congratulate the Marriage Foundation on promoting Marriage Week, which I believe has been marked for the past 22 years—not quite as long as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been married, but not far off. I also congratulate the Mental Health Foundation, which has worked on mental health issues for more than 70 years. I am actually wearing a tie with the mental health tartan, which was developed by Support in Mind Scotland as a colourful way to promote mental health awareness and understanding.

As we have heard, Marriage Week is all about the ingredients of positive and healthy relationships, which are at the heart of a successful and vibrant society. Families and relationships bring meaning and purpose to people’s lives, and they come in all shapes and sizes, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire
(Andrew Selous) said. Governments have a responsibility to support them by providing good-quality public services and fair work practices to ensure that people can live healthy and fruitful lives. When people feel supported by such services and by a positive sense of community, relationships can flourish. That is an ambition of all Governments, no matter what their political character may be or in which part of the United Kingdom they may operate.

It is right to stress that not all marriages are happy or end as happily as they began. It is important to have services and support in place to help those partnerships to move forward as positively as possible. In Scotland, a lot of support is provided to national family support organisations, such as Relationships Scotland and The Spark. As the hon. Gentleman also said, that importance is particularly true in making sure that the support is there for children, whether that is mental health support or mediation.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, people present at our surgeries and we, as Members of Parliament, have an individual responsibility to signpost people to the right organisations and to be aware of the range of support services available nationally and in our communities.

Marriages come in all shapes and sizes, and Scotland was of course the first country in the United Kingdom to consult on same-sex marriage and subsequently to legalise it, through the Marriage and Civil Partnerships (Scotland) Act 2014. That has been a cause of great celebration, including among close friends of mine.

Not every marriage, however, is made through free choice. That is why we must also recognise the importance of having robust legislation in place to protect against the appalling practice of forced marriage and to ensure that marriage is not a misery or a trap. The Scottish Government introduced forced marriage protection orders to protect people from being forced to marry, or who were already in a forced marriage. In September 2014, that protection was extended to protect those at risk and to make forcing someone into a marriage a criminal offence in Scotland.

By coincidence, there was a particularly high-profile exponent of marriage in the news last week. The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, gave an interview to her local station, Sunny Govan Radio. She was asked what had surprised her in recent years, and she said her marriage had surprised her:

“I had always been a bit of a feminist and never really considered marriage as an option. When Peter and I decided to get married, it was immediate how much more strong and stable I felt knowing that I had him at my back. His support and the support of my mum and dad give me the resilience and strength to keep going every day and doing my best.”

I hope those are words of encouragement to everyone who is considering marriage. Nobody is an island. None of us politicians is an island. We all have colleagues who have experienced difficulties and intimidation. When you are the one person in a room standing up speaking, that is difficult for any one of us. For most of us, it is the knowledge of the strong relationships in the background, whether marriage or other forms of partnership, or friends and family, that provides that support network that we rely on.

That point links to the importance of Mental Health Awareness Week. The First Minister went on to speak about some of the challenges and stresses that come with life in the public eye, particularly her experience of ‘imposter syndrome. When asked if she ever feels like an imposter, she said:

“Like many women in senior positions, yes I absolutely do. However, I think it gives women a bit of humility too and reminds you that you have to work hard for what you need to achieve. It keeps you grounded. Do I deserve this? Could I do better? It makes you more accountable for your own work.”

That level of self-awareness and her willingness to speak out should be an encouragement for everyone in public life and beyond. It is important to use such opportunities to raise awareness of the issues.

The main focus for Mental Health Awareness Week this year is body image—a subject that has become topical in the last few days with the issues that led to the cancellation of “The Jeremy Kyle Show” and questions about “Love Island” and other reality TV programmes. Sometimes, frankly, this job can feel like a bit of a reality TV programme, though it is less likely to be slated for immediate cancellation. Using the opportunity of awareness weeks to turn the debate on social media around and to try to detoxify online culture is hugely important. We must support people who champion body positivity online and make sure that people who are struggling with those kinds of issue, especially young people, interact with social media content in a healthy way and avoid falling into mental spirals.

The Scottish Government have made several announcements to try to support that this week. They are setting up an advisory group on healthy body image, which will include members from youth, third sector and equalities groups, to identify steps that can improve support for young people and advice for relevant professionals. That will build on a package of measures to improve young people’s mental health, including £90,000 in funding to provide advice on the healthy use of social media and screen time, and a review of evidence on the effects of screen use on sleep and its implications for mental health.

We will continue to drive that forward and, again, I hope there will be lessons that the Governments can learn from each other. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire spoke about how such issues can be championed in Government. The Scottish Government have a dedicated ministerial post for mental health. The occupant, Clare Haughey, was herself a mental health nurse and brings significant personal experience to the post. The desire to see mental health issues mainstreamed across the NHS and other support organisations runs right across the national strategy.

Like other hon. Members, I see fantastic examples in my own constituency. The members at Flourish House, part of the global Clubhouse Network, presented me with this tie the last time I met them. They wanted to engage with me on different aspects of how Government and public policy affect people with mental health issues, particularly on questions around welfare reform, but also other aspects of social care and the health services. Flourish House does a fantastic job in reducing social isolation and providing different kinds of activity and engagement for its members. Similarly, the Coach House Trust provides a particular focus on employability and skills. It has been doing so for more than 20 years...
and has an annual open day that is a highlight of the summer calendar. We are always spoilt for choice with the arts and crafts available for sale that have been produced by their members over the years.

I also pay tribute to a group called Differabled, which was founded by parents in my constituency to provide support for other parents and carers of children and young adults with a range of additional support and mental health needs. I met them during the 2017 election campaign and it was an incredibly powerful experience. The way that organisation has developed is incredibly impressive, and I continue to support it.

The Glasgow Riding for the Disabled Association helps to promote the mental health benefits of physical activity and physical exercise in different ways. It was the beneficiary of the Christmas card competition that I ran in my constituency last year. Last year and the year before, the winners of the competition came from two of the schools that provide support to children with additional needs and mental health issues. East Park in Maryhill has been supporting young people since 1874, and Alexander Houston was a worthy winner of last year’s competition. Abercorn Secondary School, which is supported by the local authority, provides a fantastic supportive environment, and Jack Slavin’s Christmas castle featured on my card in 2017. Kelbourne Park Primary School, in North Kelvinside in my constituency, supports younger age groups in a wonderfully nurturing environment. I use this opportunity to offer them my full support.

There has been a fair degree of consensus in this debate, particularly on the importance of stability in relationships for good mental health, and the benefits that that has for wider society in promoting social justice and tackling poverty, and the many different things that, in our different capacities, we all came into politics to try to achieve. There is a challenge to the Governments in the United Kingdom and the devolved nations to ensure that adequate funding is in place for the different services and that the appropriate legislative frameworks are in place to support families and the various organisations that work with them.

I hope the Chamber will indulge me, because on 1 June, during the recess, I will be attending a wedding of two very good friends of mine, Emma and Adam. I have known Adam Sutherland since we were very young. I hope the Chamber will join me in wishing them all the best.

2.40 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the chair, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate and I thank hon. Members who have contributed to mark Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for

Heim Mr. Selous) focused on family relationship issues and poverty, and the role of family breakdown.

In line with my brief, I want to bring this debate back to mental health, because it is Mental Health Awareness week and we could explore some issues there, too. I feel that, no matter how strong a family are, there will be times when they need support from outside—when they need the services that the state can provide to help them to cope. If those services are not there when they need them, it can cause immense strain for everyone involved. This is every bit as true for mental health as it is for physical health services.

We do not expect families to cope with a broken leg or a cardiac problem on their own, so we should not expect them to cope with depression or an eating disorder without professional support. I want to question whether we really are doing all we can for families where one child is living with a mental health condition and they need help. Whatever our best intentions, the fact is that we are not yet doing the best we can for children and families.

According to the British Medical Association, spending on mental health care equates to only 11% of our UK NHS budget, despite accounting for 23% of the burden of disease in the UK. As we know, there is increasing demand for mental health care, with patient numbers increasing across a range of conditions. It might be time to look at that number and decide whether it should be greater, particularly for children and young people. We know that one in eight five to 19-year-olds has at least one mental disorder, but that only 6% of the mental health budget is spent on services for children and young people. I believe it is time we questioned that, because such a gap has serious consequences for children and young people with mental health conditions.

Some 400,000 children and young people who have a mental health condition do not get to see a professional at all. Instead, they have to cope with informal support. More than one in four of the children and young people referred to specialist child and adolescent mental health services in 2016-17 did not have their referral accepted. As the Children’s Society analysis showed us last year—it is a very disturbing statistic—a quarter of 14-year-old girls and nearly one in 10 boys had self-harmed in a year.

I commend Sky News and their reporter Paul Kelso for a great piece of investigative work that sheds light on the experiences of children and young people in private mental health units, many of which take young people hundreds of miles from their homes and families. The report of this work was shown yesterday. One such young person is Natasha, who is now rebuilding her life after a lost decade spent in such units. Natasha has anorexia and escalating self-harm, and she hit crisis point when she was only 12. She then spent 10 years in private mental health units dotted around the country. She says she reached her lowest point in a mental health unit in a privately run hospital in Maidenhead. In that unit, she experienced brutal restraint, which she describes as follows:

“They would pin you up against the wall, smack your head against the wall, drag you across floors, wrap you round doorframes...People sat on your head and on your legs...this would be big men, not women.”
That was the unit where she said she did “the worst amounts of self harm” that she had ever done in her life. Despite Natasha’s history of self-harm, she was left unattended with razors and cut herself 26 times. She needed 200 stitches.

The constant threat of self-harm is a massive strain and worry for parents when their daughter is hundreds of miles away. A mother with a daughter in one of the units that was shown in the Sky News film described how when she wakes up she thinks, “Is she all right? Will she manage to achieve her self-harm aim today?” She added, “You are hundreds of miles away. If anything happened, you would not get there on time.” As the Sky News report showed, the toll of self-harm and suicide in these units is too high. Natasha explained how she lost 24 of her friends to suicide in such mental health units, including three or four in one unit alone.

Hon. Members here today will know how it feels when a desperate constituent tells us about their child’s mental health condition and the struggle they face being unable to get their child access to the services they need. This is intolerable. We have seen mental health services being underfunded—I know the Minister will tell me about the future funding that is coming in, but we have to think about where we are today—and we know that mental health budgets fell by nearly 8% between 2010 and 2015. Sadly, we are still seeing one in 10 commissioning groups unable to meet the investment standard expected of them by the Government, which means they are failing to give mental health services the funding priority they need. We must do better than that.

In 2017, Labour set out a clear plan for how we would do better than that. I want to touch on those points. Over the past decade, mental health spending has been a part of broader NHS budgets, but as budget pressures emerged, NHS trusts and commissioning groups raided their mental health budgets to prop up services elsewhere. To that end—I know the Government have not been keen on this—Labour would ring-fence mental health budgets, which is important to ensure that the money that those services need is not siphoned off to fill gaps elsewhere.

As we think about children, young people and their families, it is important that we question why only 6% of mental health spending goes to services targeted at children and young people, despite them making up some 22% of the population. Labour would dramatically increase the proportion of the mental health budget spent on children and young people.

Following on from what I said about yesterday’s Sky News programme, we would end the disgraceful practice of sending people hundreds of miles for mental health treatment when there is no good reason to do so. In the past year, sadly we have seen the number of inappropriate out-of-area placements rise from 640 to 720, despite a Government pledge to reduce their use. I see these out-of-area placements as a tragedy for families. They jeopardise the recovery of people receiving treatment and force parents and other family members to travel long distances to support the young person. With Mental Health Awareness Week, let us not persist in treating mental health as the Cinderella service of the NHS, and children and young people’s services as the Cinderella service inside that Cinderella service.
be hard. It ought to be available to us to give people extra help. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton referred to the troubled families programme in her opening remarks. The ethos behind the programme was to support the families that needed extra help. We need to learn from that programme to see what works best so that we can do things better. That is very much in our thinking.

My hon. Friend also talked about some of the initiatives that we are already taking with respect to mental health and highlighted the new mental health teams that we are creating. She suggested that the teams need to work not only in schools but in families. Sir David, you heard me speak about the Charles Dickens primary school in Southwark in another meeting. I visited it as we were developing our thinking on the new support teams, and it had taken a very imaginative approach to embedding mental wellbeing throughout the school and the curriculum. Instead of having teaching assistants in the classroom assisting, the teaching assistants were doing one-to-one interventions with children. As well as one-to-one tuition, some of them were involved in reaching out and building relationships with the parents. Our school network is exactly where we ought to be able to identify the people who need a little more help.

Fiona Bruce: I am delighted to hear that. I do not know whether the Minister has heard of a similar approach taken by Middlewich High School in my constituency, but what is excellent about that is that the school is now reporting improved GCSE results because it works not only with the pupil, but with the whole family.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As my hon. Friend says, it is not rocket science. If someone is physically, mentally and socially fit, they will have a feeling of wellbeing overall. If any of those pillars falls down, it drags down the rest. If people have a happy environment at home, they will be happier in school and more disciplined and focused. If they live in a dysfunctional environment, they will not be able to learn from that programme to see what works best so that we can do things better. That is very much in our thinking.

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Jackie Doyle-Price: As my hon. Friend says, it is not rocket science. If someone is physically, mentally and socially fit, they will have a feeling of wellbeing overall. If any of those pillars falls down, it drags down the rest. If people have a happy environment at home, they will be happier in school and more disciplined and focused. If they live in a dysfunctional environment, they will want to escape, and that will not be good for their GCSEs or anything to do with their long-term development.

Fiona Bruce: Will the Minister allow me to intervene again? I do not want to interrupt too many times.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We have plenty of time.

Fiona Bruce: Yes, so we have heard from Sir David. Corporates are also realising how important this is to the bottom line: productivity. If people arrive at work having left a happier home, they will be more productive, which is an interesting factor to consider if we multiply it across the nation. It is fascinating that we have one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the world, but also low productivity compared with many of our competitor countries. The Minister touches on that when she talks about the flourishing of a human being in terms of relationships and productivity, which are not disconnected.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a very good point. We can expect employers to start doing things when they can see a return for themselves. It is interesting also that, as we reach higher levels of employment and as an appropriately skilled workforce is harder to come by, employers see the advantage of giving more help and support to their staff in order to retain them and keep them productive. We look forward to seeing more of that. Certainly our work through “Thriving at Work” with Mind, Paul Farmer and Lord Stevenson is designed to share best practice and encourage more.

My hon. Friend also talked about the long waits for children’s mental health services, which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) also talked about. We have to concede that, historically, children’s mental health services have been very poorly funded and supplied, and we are dealing with the aftermath of that now. Everyone knows the extent of our ambition to deliver much improved mental health services to children and young people. However, we still have to properly address the situation that we have inherited. We are playing catch-up, but we will push forward and make sure that children have access to services. The mental health support teams are the first point of contact for children, helping them look after their own wellbeing.

Barbara Keeley: One interesting point, which I did not make, from the piece of work that I referred to from yesterday is that placements for children and young people in private units of the type that I talked about are more expensive. They can be £500,000, £600,000 or £700,000 a year, whereas support in the community would doubtless not be much as that. They would not be 200 miles away from the families, and they would have the support that they need.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree completely. The reason why we have so many children in out-of-area placements—which, as the hon. Lady says, are expensive—is that there has not been sufficient support in the community. Nor has it been available early enough to give the children support. They have been badly failed. It has done them harm and made them more ill. The issue of out-of-area placements is of massive concern to me. I am making it a personal priority to fix it. I am concerned that, because it is seen as a specialised area of commissioning for NHS England, it commissions a quantum of beds, but that is what leads to them being out of area, and children are referred to them. We all know that their recovery will be much better if they are in their support networks near their friends and families.

When the system works well, it is absolutely inspirational. I visited an intensive care unit in east London last year. A young lady had come out the other side, having gone in for treatment for self-harm and anorexia. She was very clear that being able to undergo treatment while still being able to attend school was crucial to her recovery. To me, that seems compelling. I am deeply unhappy at the extent to which out-of-area placements are still being used. I am afraid there will probably be a need for them until we can be properly confident in our community services to work more effectively, but I am sure we all agree that we need to tackle it as soon as we can.

I enjoyed listening to the observations of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about what makes a happy marriage. He is right that hard work is a big part of it.

The hon. Gentleman also shared the length of marriage in his family. This year, my parents are celebrating 50 years of marriage. Having lived with them for 21 of
those, I have to say that that is quite an achievement. Obviously, it takes real work. As he says, quite often we do not like our partners, but clearly, notwithstanding the difficulties, they give us comfort and security. Not having a support network to rely on, whether that is a partner, wider family or friends, makes life a lot more difficult. I recognise that some relationships will be rollercoasters. Pressures, such as financial debts, can cause untold difficulties in relationships. There will be times when people need support and we need to make it easy for them to ask for it. We have heard several references to organisations that try to give support to couples, such as Relate. A problem shared is a problem halved—we need to encourage more of that.

I was horrified by the story that the hon. Gentleman shared of the couple neither of whom wanted custody of their children. That suggests that they were the product of dysfunctional families, which is another thing to consider. If we leave children to grow up in dysfunctional families, they will repeat that experience. We need to try to do better to improve the quality of family relationships, because that would be good for society. When we look at the back stories of people who end up in prison, we see that there were no end of opportunities where they came into contact with the state, either at school or in other ways. That is a failure for us and we need to tackle it.

It is always a pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, who really is a social justice warrior. Again, he brought home clearly the effect of the state applying process to everything and forgetting the humanity of people. We need to be more sensitive about how we intervene supportively. The institutions and the way we organise society can be excessively intimidating and formal, which is not the way to deal with people who need more emotional support. We need to think carefully about what sort of agencies should do that. The beauty of schools, and directing support via schools, is that they are not intimidating or formal institutions. Parents and children have peer support there, over and above their actual attendance, from friends and other people attending and taking their children.

We need to look at the avenues for engagement with people and make sure that they are fit for purpose, and to recognise that all Departments have a role in that. We siloise that contact. Mrs Bloggs takes little Jimmy to school, has a nice relationship and feels that they are being supported, but when she goes to the Department for Work and Pensions, she is treated as an operational performance and it is dehumanising. That is where we need to be more joined-up in the support that we are giving to families. There is a lot to learn. State institutions rely on process to ensure uniformity and fairness, but that does not always lead to good outcomes.

As my hon. Friend said, Governments are expected to do everything, but for the reasons I have outlined they are not always best placed to do that. Sometimes, rather than inventing processes and grand programmes, we should look more actively at letting 1,000 flowers bloom. Where third-sector organisations bring value, we should look at directly commissioning more services from them. That is the case in respect of mental health, because not all support for people suffering mental ill-health is clinical. Quite often, they will benefit from support that just helps them to get through life. That is something that third-sector organisations can do well. I have challenged clinical commissioning groups to look more actively at what they can do, because they will be able to deliver more care by not always relying on clinical staff.

I greatly enjoyed listening to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). He is wearing a fetching tartan and I am jealous that we have only the green ribbons. I will think about how we can outdo the Scottish tartan for Mental Health Awareness Week next year. He reminded us that it has been quite a week for mental health and mentioned the axing of “The Jeremy Kyle Show”. The incident that preceded that axing is a wake-up call; it shows that dysfunctional families have become entertainment. What does that say about how we operate as a society? I hope this gives everybody an opportunity for some self-reflection; it is not something that we should use for entertainment.

Barbara Keeley: I wanted to refer to what the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said about detoxifying issues, which is important. The worst thing that I have read about “The Jeremy Kyle Show” is not that it focused on dysfunctional families, but that it set people against each other in an aggressive way, so it needed bouncers and security staff on hand to part people. The programme seems to have used a toxic formula, which is something that the House could look through an inquiry, because that could persist in other types of filming. Clearly, it has had a tragic outcome, which, given the Minister’s brief, we have to take seriously.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I share that view. By definition, if people are making TV that is designed to be entertaining, it will be manipulative and exploitative. A good friend of mine went on “I’m a Celebrity…Get Me Out of Here!”—not the person who was an hon. Member, but someone else. He told me in great detail about how situations were manipulated to generate conflict. Because he is already a celebrity, he is resilient and well equipped for that, but we can imagine that for people who are not, and for whom being in the public eye is new, the risk of harm is significant. I understand that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee will be looking at the issue, and I welcome that inquiry. If someone switches on the TV, there will be any number of reality TV shows on—often because, in truth, they are cheap to make. Given their proliferation, perhaps we ought to have some standards that producers should respect.

Another example—this shows how much rubbish I watch on TV—is the axing of “Celebrity Big Brother” earlier this year, or perhaps last year, because of an incident between two celebrities on it. I think the public showed such revulsion because they were celebrities whom the public perceived they knew. If it had been the non-celebrity version and they were two strangers, I doubt that there would have been the same reaction. That tells us that, actually, we have all been manipulated by it. It is only when something terrible happens that we stand back and think, “Hang on a minute, we shouldn’t be doing this.” But here we are.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South made some very fair criticisms about the challenges to children and young people’s mental health. I agree that
one of the reasons that we are where we are is that, historically, child and adolescent mental health services have been far less effective than they ought to have been. I vividly remember the Sky film that the hon. Lady referred to, and I have to say that some of the practices that were referred to in it are utterly unacceptable.

I have been very clear with the CQC that institutions that apply restraint to the extent that the hon. Lady described are totally unacceptable, and it is now being much more aggressive in implementing inspections. We will hold organisations to account. In that respect, the Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) will be a great help. We are in the process of agreeing guidance to deliver that. It will require a real cultural change, but I often say that sunlight is the best disinfectant. The best led institutions are open about when they have to use restraint and fully document it; the worst do not report it at all, and that really has to change. That is something that the CQC challenges now when it visits organisations. I want the number not only out-of-area placements, but in patient placements more generally, to come down. That will be a mark of success and a sign that we really are investing in improved community services for our children and young people.

The hon. Lady also referred to the appalling extent to which the young lady in the film had come across people who had engaged in suicide and self-harm. I am pleased that we now have the Zero Suicide Alliance, which is led by the fabulous Joe Rafferty, the chief executive of Mersey Care. Our ambition is to have zero suicides as a consequence of any NHS-funded care. That was launched at the end of last year, and we need to use it as a tool to drive improvements in this area.

As the hon. Lady said, we have the mental health investment standards, whereby we expect local trusts and CCGs to spend more of their budgets on mental health. She suggested that funding should be ring-fenced. I have always felt that ring-fences can be seen as ceilings. However, we are committed, through the long-term plan, to ensuring that all local commissioners abide by those standards, which are a ring-fence in all but name. We are closer than we have been on that issue.

I again remind hon. Members about the troubled families programme, which has been dealing with 400,000 families. It will be revisited next year, and we would welcome any representations from hon. Members about how we can learn from it and improve how we help families with complex needs. Obviously, we need to develop better outcomes for all family members.

Coming back to Marriage Week, we know that good quality relationships are critical for all of us, as they add to our overall happiness. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire said, some people do not necessarily want their relationship to be recognised as a marriage. None the less, we all benefit from stable, loving and supportive relationships. With my suicide prevention hat on, I will say that relationship breakdown is the biggest driver of suicide. That is another reason why we should always enable people to find help when they need it.

As far as the impact on children and their life chances is concerned, we know that by the age of five, almost half of children in low-income households have seen their families break apart, compared with only 16% of children in higher-income households. As my hon. Friend said, we must address that social injustice because when relationships break down, there is a risk of poor outcomes in the long run.

I see health visitors as very important partners—I always refer to them as my army. They are on the frontline, and their contact with people is less formalised. They are the one group of people who can engage with the entirety of the family. They look not just at the baby and mum, but at dad and the siblings, too. We need to take advantage of those interventions to do better for families in general.

We are spending £39 million on the reducing parental conflict programme, which is designed to reduce conflict between parents who are still together, and work with them to strengthen their relationship, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton wants, to help them to stay together if that is what they want. We should also recognise that separation can sometimes be the best option, particularly if there are other factors involved that can cause distress for the children. Even in the event of a separation, continued co-operation and communication between parents and their children will give advantage to the child.

Although the Government will continue to support and champion marriage, we will not discriminate against other types of families who require our support. We will ensure that parents can access help when they need it, whether they are already married and need help to sustain their partnership, are not married and wish to improve the health of their relationship, or have chosen to separate.

I turn to what we are delivering through the NHS long-term plan. The improvement in perinatal mental health services will help us to engage people when they are at risk, assess people’s circumstances, give peer support and perhaps just make a decisive intervention at a time of real stress for families, where either the mother or the father becomes ill.

The theme of this year’s Mental Health Awareness Week is not marriage but body image. The two are not entirely unconnected, because how we think and feel about our bodies obviously affects how we engage with other people. Just as we need to get real and think about working harder, not everything will be ideal. We are not all going to have a marriage that is like a fairy tale 100% of the time, and we are not all going to look like Claudia Schiffer. That is okay—that is normal—and we just need to be aware of that.

It is worrying that, according to the Mental Health Foundation, 39% of children feel shame in relation to body image. We ought to think about the causes of that stark statistic. People are bombarded with images via social media, and so on, so we need to encourage parents to spend time with their children and make sure that children know what they can realistically expect. They cannot expect to look like the doctored images that they are being shown.

That comes back to the issue of quality time. Smartphones have been absolutely revolutionally for our society. Is it not fantastic that we can find information about anything we want and contact people at any time? However, face-to-face engagement, especially between parents and their kids, is really important. I pay tribute to Frankie & Benny’s, the restaurant chain, which has...
said that to encourage parents to speak to their children while they are having a meal, it will give them a discount if they hand their phone over.

We are so easily distracted by time spent on a phone. The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up, and the last thing I do at night, is to look at my phone. It is not very healthy, to be honest. We need to encourage our children to have a healthy relationship with their smartphones, and the same is true for ourselves. There is no substitute for some good parent-child conversation, and that does not need to take place via WhatsApp or text.

Broader mental health support is available to people who suffer from mental health problems. IAPT provides couples therapy for depression, which is available through the NHS. That directly helps relationships.

This debate has been interesting and thought provoking, and it has highlighted many issues that, although we may agree about them, we perhaps need to be more proactive about properly addressing. They are not the easiest things to deal with, because they are about human failings, but it is good to hear that so many colleagues are bothered about them and actively think about them.

Mental health problems can affect anyone, any day of the year. Those problems have a bearing not only on the wellbeing of the individual, but on marriages, relationships and children. We must continue to work together, across Government and with our partners, to address some of those issues. As a society, we all need to be more sensitive about the stresses of particular times, such as when people experience job loss, debt or relationship breakdown, to ensure that we give people appropriate support.

I am sure we can all agree that Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week provide us with excellent opportunities to bring those subjects together. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for their thoughtful contributions. I was very pleased to hear the Minister respond in such a constructive way. Her tone, as well as her words, said a lot when she recognised both the impact of family relationships on mental health and the fact that more needs to be done.

I thank the Minister for not sticking to her notes, but instead responding so thoughtfully to so many of the comments that were made. As we have heard—it is a matter of social justice—there is a real need to put strengthening relationships at the heart of Government policy, nationally and locally, to provide joined-up support for families. As the Minister said, the troubled families initiative has started to do that.

As the Minister also said, we need to better support the many excellent voluntary organisations engaged in this area. Crucially, today we have also recognised the importance of marriage in helping to address the country's major mental health problem. As Members have said, that is not in any way to criticise or condemn those whose home circumstances are different—far from it. We are saying that building relationship capability is for all of us, because we all aspire to have beneficial and flourishing relationships in our lives. We know their benefits.

I was particularly interested to hear the Minister say that because these issues straddle so many Government Departments, and because of the processes and the way that Departments work in silos, addressing them is quite a challenge. That is exactly why the proposal of a Cabinet Minister for the family, to draw together the work on such issues across Departments and support people more effectively, is so important. I close by saying that after the authoritative and compassionate speech that he gave today—it represented the tip of the iceberg of many years’ work on this issue—I cannot think of any hon. Member who would better fill that role than my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire; I hope the Minister will forgive me for saying so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks.

3.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Monday 20 May 2019

[MRS MADELEINE MOON in the Chair]

Immunity for Soldiers

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I advise Members that under the terms of the House's long-standing resolution on matters sub judice, they must not refer to specific cases that are currently subject to legal proceedings, including in coroners' courts. Members may, of course, speak to the general issue.

4.30 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 243947 relating to immunity for soldiers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I extend my gratitude to Karen Webb-James for starting this e-petition, which has attracted over 146,000 signatures, including 238 from my constituency, and calls on the Government not to “prosecute the military for its work in Northern Ireland”, and to prevent “criminal investigations after a period of time.”

I am pleased to address this topic and the sentiment behind this e-petition. Through the Defence Committee’s 2017 report, “Investigations into fatalities in Northern Ireland involving British military personnel”, and written evidence to the Committee from individuals such as Professor Richard Ekins, we have learned more about the extent of this issue, and we have discovered that there could easily be prosecution of our armed forces personnel who were involved in other, more modern, theatres of conflict. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will want to refer to those instances. I pay tribute to all those who have served in operations, especially those who have died in the service of our country.

Given the nature of the petition, I am concentrating my remarks on the situation in Northern Ireland; I hope hon. Members will see that there is good reason.

I hold veterans and serving members of our armed forces in the highest regard. I hope and believe that that sentiment is shared across this Chamber. In my short tenure as the Member of Parliament for Southport, I have sought to spend a considerable proportion of my parliamentary time raising issues pertinent to those forces. I am glad to do so again today, although I think that many hon. Members would agree that this issue should have been resolved some time ago.

I welcome this debate, and I thank all hon. Members from across Parliament who are present, including my right hon. and hon. Friends. I am also delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). His perseverance and unrelenting dedication to our veterans has encouraged the Government to act more swiftly on this issue. While policing and justice issues in Northern Ireland are now ordinarily devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive—or, in their absence, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—the legacy of the troubles remains a matter for this Parliament and the UK Government to contend with.

To do justice to the issue, we must meet it with the utmost respect and candour.

In a debate on this topic last May, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) reminded us of the incredibly high number of lives lost during the troubles in Northern Ireland: an astonishing 3,500 people were killed in those terrible years. Let us break that figure down. Approximately 3,000 of those victims were killed by non-state forces—Republican terrorists and loyalist paramilitaries. Some 370 were killed by security forces. A total of 722 members of the security services—mainly British soldiers—were also killed. Twice as many soldiers were killed by terrorists as terrorists were killed by soldiers. That should give us British citizens tremendous confidence in our armed forces' sacrifices ensured terrorism would never succeed. However, our approach to the past must be consistent with the rule of law...This Government will always salute the British citizens tremendous confidence in our armed forces. Despite the Government’s unwavering gratitude to our armed forces, there remains a disproportionately high, and arguably unnecessary, number of investigations in the light of the number of killings attributed to the armed forces in Northern Ireland. In a speech in this Chamber in 2017, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said:

“The reality today is that 90% of the resources of the legacy investigation branch...are devoted to investigating 10% of the deaths during the troubles, and 10% of its resources are devoted to investigating 90% of the deaths.”—[Official Report, 10 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 68WH.]

This e-petition seeks to address that issue.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My hon. Friend has hit on a key point. Members of the armed forces and security forces went out every day during Operation Banner to prevent people from being killed. They had to make extraordinary life-and-death decisions at a moment’s notice. The terrorists went out to kill and maim; that was their purpose. We have to remember that 90% of the deaths in Northern Ireland during the troubles were at the hands of terrorists.

Damien Moore: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The armed forces were there from the outset to protect peace; the terrorists were there to inflict harm on people. That is an important distinction to make.

In a debate on this topic last May, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) reminded us of the incredibly high number of lives lost during the troubles in Northern Ireland: an astonishing 3,500 people were killed in those terrible years. Let us break that figure down. Approximately 3,000 of those victims were killed by non-state forces—Republican terrorists and loyalist paramilitaries. Some 370 were killed by security forces. A total of 722 members of the security services—mainly British soldiers—were also killed. Twice as many soldiers were killed by terrorists as terrorists were killed by soldiers. That should give us British citizens tremendous confidence in our armed forces' sacrifices ensured terrorism would never succeed. However, our approach to the past must be consistent with the rule of law...This Government will always salute the
forces. It is proof of the commendable restraint shown by the British Army and the Police Service of Northern Ireland at that time.

All those killings, bar a few outstanding terrorist cases, have been investigated fully—often repeatedly. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), a distinguished and gallant veteran, said last week in an urgent question on the subject that he had been through the process more than once. He is not alone in that. Despite the investigations, matters are complicated further by subsequent developments, poor record keeping, the passing of former servicemen and women, the hundreds of royal pardons that have been granted over time, and the over 500 prisoners released on licence until the year 2000.

The entire process so far appears to have been rigged against our armed forces and in favour of terrorist groups. That does not provide closure or justice. Terrorists and illegal paramilitary forces cannot and must not be viewed or treated as being equal to the police and armed forces, as if they were somehow standing on shared moral ground; they never have done, and never will. However, the legal framework would have us believe that the words “terrorists” and “servicemen and women” should be treated equally in the context of Northern Ireland—they should not.

Having said that, I appreciate the need for closure felt by everyone involved in those tragic years of our great nation’s history. Likewise, I respect the implications of the Good Friday agreement, and understand the pain and suffering endured by the victims’ families, who yearn for justice. Where crimes have been committed—they do happen, albeit rarely—the rule of law should be applied, those involved should be investigated, and prosecutions should be forthcoming. However, let us be clear: in the midst of conflict, those instances are the exception, not the rule. The overwhelming majority of our servicemen and women believe in the preservation of life and the rule of law. They swore to uphold those values in making their vow to the Queen and the people of the United Kingdom when enlisting into the armed forces, and they believe in those values today.

Let us look at some key historical facts. Operation Banner was the longest military engagement in the history of the British Army. During the troubles, as I mentioned, there were more than 3,500 deaths, some 60% of which were murders carried out by republican paramilitary terrorists, mainly from the Provisional IRA. Approximately 30% were carried out by loyalist paramilitaries. British and Irish state forces were responsible for 10% of the deaths; almost all of those occurred as a result of entirely lawful or yellow-card actions, when soldiers and police officers were instructed to act to preserve life and uphold the virtues of the rule of law.

Another stark fact about that period is that a member of the security forces in Northern Ireland was three times more likely to be killed than a member of the IRA, which contrasts with today’s theatres of war, where members of terrorist organisations are three times more likely to be killed than members of the armed forces. That point alone depicts the unrelenting bravery of those who served in Northern Ireland.

Let there be no doubt that paramilitary terrorists were responsible for almost 90% of deaths in Northern Ireland, including more than 3,000 unsolved murders. If we consider that in comparison with the 10% of deaths that have been attributed to those who were serving with the armed forces at the time, we may begin to understand the relentlessness faced by those victims and their beloved families, and the burning injustice faced by our veterans who are being routinely investigated.

The Good Friday agreement, which was hailed as a triumph in 1998, advanced long-term peace in Northern Ireland. For some, however, it may also have inadvertently equalised those who sought to defend the Crown and those who sought to bring it down in the most violent fashion, and have tilted the scale in favour of the terrorists by authorising the early release from jail of many—too many.

Terrorists killed more than 1,000 servants of the Crown involved in Operation Banner. The victims were members of several armed forces divisions, such as the Army, the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment. Police forces, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary and other constabularies, also lost hundreds of lives at the hands of the terrorists. We cannot do anything to bring those men and women back to their families and loved ones, but we can do something to honour them: ensure that justice is done.

What did the UK Government do instead? They went to explicit lengths to show mercy to people who had been found guilty of the most heinous crimes. One of many examples is Sean Kelly, the infamous Shankill bomber. Prior to 1998, Kelly had been found guilty of murdering seven people and condemned to nine life terms in prison. As it turned out, he barely served seven years.

Despite efforts to investigate the unsolved murders that occurred during the troubles in Northern Ireland, of which the Historical Enquiries Team set up by the Chief Constable is the most prominent, it is saddening and frustrating to see how little real effort has been put into prosecuting the perpetrators of approximately 90% of the crimes committed, while those who fought to preserve the state have been subjected to multiple investigations. Some of those investigations started more than four decades ago and have been opened and closed multiple times, with no consideration for the old age and welfare of those being investigated.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the powerful case he is making for Op Banner. Does he agree that central to the debate must be the fact that the Secretary of State for Defence is making an oral statement tomorrow in the House of Commons, as I understand it, which will set out a 10-year statute of limitations on all operations around the world, apart from Northern Ireland? Can we deduce from the fact that the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, is answering the debate that Northern Ireland is excluded from tomorrow’s statement because the Northern Ireland Office insisted on that? Would it not be better if a Defence Minister were here to answer on behalf of our soldiers?

Damien Moore: My hon. Friend is right. The Ministry of Defence should take the lead on this matter, so as to defend our armed forces as they gallantly defend us.

If the Government used the same tenacity to pursue the real criminals, it would go a long way towards reassuring former and current loyal servants of the
Crown, and their family members, that their service had not been and will not be forgotten. The state asked an awful lot of those men and women at the most crucial and bloody time—a time when its existence was in jeopardy. They were willing and ready to answer that call. As representatives of the state, we should do everything in our power to ensure that those people do not live the last years of their lives in fear of repercussions for protecting our citizens, our values and our United Kingdom.

Last week, the Secretary of State for Defence announced that British troops and veterans will be given stronger legal protections against prosecution. Those protections will prevent investigation of actions on the battlefield after 10 years, except in exceptional circumstances, so that there are no repeated or unfair investigations. Although I welcome her announcement, I was disappointed that, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) said, the protections will exclude those involved in Operation Banner.

James Gray: The important thing is that the Secretary of State is introducing a Bill to bring in the 10-year statute of limitations, and that Bill will, of course, be amendable. Last week, in answer to my point of order, the Speaker of the House of Commons made it plain that the Bill could be amended to include Northern Ireland. Will my hon. Friend join me in tabling amendments to the Bill, so that the Op Banner soldiers are included with everybody else?

Damien Moore: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is the right thing for us to do. As I look around the room, I see many hon. Members who will answer that clarion call to amend the legislation so that Operation Banner in Northern Ireland is included. That should not have had to be done in an amendment, however; it should be in the Bill already. It is the Government’s duty to care for and look after our precious veterans, who stood on the frontlines to protect us from some of the bloodiest enemies our nation has ever encountered.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. We all have veterans in our constituencies who are in their 70s and have received paperwork from the Ministry of Defence that they are too scared to open, because they are worried about what it means, and they do not know what will happen afterwards. This is about people who put their life on the line, as he said, but who now do not feel that they have support from their Government or community. The Government need to act.

Damien Moore: The hon. Lady makes an important point; we must foster a true caring environment for our veterans. They should not be hounded in old age, and sometimes illness, by the thought that there could be a letter or a knock at the door that will mean them having to answer for something that happened many years ago.

I say to the Government: enough with the hesitation, and enough with the special provisions that, in the name of supposed human rights violations, have caused our country’s dereliction of its sacred duty of care. We cannot let brave former personnel spend the rest of their life in fear of yet more investigations, more trials and more prosecutions. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) rightly proposed that a statute of limitations be introduced to shield soldiers and police officers from further scrutiny once their names had finally been cleared by our justice system; I am pleased that the Government are looking at that. That is what a motion that he brought to the House would have achieved, and that is what the hundreds of thousands of people who signed the petition want us to do.

Servants of the Crown involved in Operation Banner have had to endure far too much because of the hesitation shown by Governments from 1998, whether in the name of political correctness or out of fear of opening old wounds. It is our duty to put an end to any wavering, and to be decisively proactive on behalf of those who bravely put their life on the line out of a sense of duty and love of country. Indeed, it falls to us Members of Parliament, and to the Government, to protect those who gave their life to protect us.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be called so early in the debate. I take your guidance about not speaking about individual circumstances, Mrs Moon. My purpose is to give a voice to the many veterans in Plymouth who have attended my surgeries and stopped me in the street to raise their concerns about what is happening. There is a real sense of betrayal among many veterans with regard to what is going on with veterans of Northern Ireland—not just among those who served there, but among those who wore a uniform anywhere. They feel that an attack on one has become an attack on all.

Those veterans have asked me to pass on their genuine concerns. In particular, they feel that the words spoken to date by the Prime Minister and by Government Ministers have been hollow—they were not meant. There is a sense that when veterans are needed for electoral purposes, there are lots of warm words about supporting them, but when those people who served our country need guidance and wrap-around support from their Government—the people who sent them into conflict and harm’s way in the first place—that is absent.

I would be grateful if the Minister set out answers to some of the questions that I have been asked. The first is about what new evidence means. A number of the reasons given for going after veterans relate to new evidence, but the definition of that is something that many of the veterans who have spoken to me struggle to understand. When new evidence from the past does not look that new or evidential, what does it mean now? That is not a matter of prejudging the guilt or otherwise of any individual but of understanding the legal framework within which any decisions may be taken.

What support are the Government—be it the Ministry of Defence or any other part of Government—providing to veterans to enable them to gain support? A number of the veterans who have contacted me are very old: something that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) also mentioned. In any other circumstance, we would be providing support for them because of their vulnerability. Strength and stoicism in this matter cannot be given as a granted because of the age of the veterans and the severity of what is taking place.

I have not met a single veteran who has said that someone who breaks the law should not be prosecuted. Indeed, every single one of them has reinforced to me, time and again, that the UK armed forces are the very
best in the world because they uphold the law, are trained in what is right and wrong, and understand what is a legal order and what is an illegal one. That sense of training and duty is very important.

Why are the decisions on this matter not going up the chain of command? Veterans have raised a question about how those being looked at now, in the round, are part of a command structure. At what point does the chain of command? Veterans have raised a question about how those being looked at now, in the round, are part of a command structure. At what point does the chain of command come into play—those politicians and senior officers who may or may not have given orders or set an engagement framework within which anyone serving in Northern Ireland will have operated?

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I intervene simply because the command structure does not really come into it. The decision is in the yellow card. Individuals have to make their own decisions about opening fire; there is no time to turn around and ask for permission. The decision can sometimes be made very quickly. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the command structure being involved, but opening fire is a personal decision and the person who makes it has to stand by it and justify it. That is why it is so important to train very hard on the yellow card.

**Luke Pollard:** Given his service to the country and experience in Northern Ireland, the hon. Gentleman knows this issue better than many others in this place. Veterans have raised the question with me about how decisions are made because sometimes there is a sense that not everyone who was involved in the operation is being pursued. However, I entirely agree with and understand the hon. Gentleman’s point.

The sense that I have been asked to communicate, and I do so for the final time now, is that many veterans who served in Northern Ireland, and many who did not, are worried and let down by the Government. They hope that whatever comes out of the situation and the debates—

**Ruth Smeeth:** It all comes down to a sense of fairness, for the victims, their families, everyone who lived through the troubles in Northern Ireland and all those who continue to live with the consequences, but also for the veterans and their families: so that they know exactly where they stand and why. It comes back to whether more effort needs to be put into peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, into talking, while ensuring that there is no prosecution at the same time. It is down to fairness for the families—for everybody.

**Luke Pollard:** I agree. Fairness is an important part of the solution to dealing with a sense of betrayal. Justice needs not only to be done but to be seen to be done and, at the moment, there is pain in many different communities.

Everyone in this House welcomes and values the progress made in Northern Ireland through the Good Friday agreement. I would like more Members to read that agreement; I sense that a lot of debate takes place without its words having been read. However, there is an opportunity here for Ministers—by they from the Northern Ireland Office or, especially, the Minister of Defence—to really understand the concerns of those who served in Northern Ireland and, equally, those who did not but just feel that something is not right here. I would be grateful if the Minister addressed the concerns raised, especially about the definition of new evidence.

4.54 pm

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I served for more than three years in Northern Ireland, on seven operational tours. I first went there in 1970. Sadly, I lost six men who were directly under my command, and many more in my unit. Almost 50 of the men under my command were wounded—35 in one incident. I have been involved in several fatality shootings. I think I have the right to speak for Northern Ireland veterans today.

We were sent to Northern Ireland by our predecessors. The Glaziers were sent in, I think, August or September 1969. We were sent to save lives, to look after people. We were given a yellow card, which was approved by Parliament, and that yellow card told us what we could and could not do under fire. We trained very hard on it. We memorised it. We rehearsed it. Colleagues are nodding their heads. We practised on exercise incidents so that we would learn.

Army training screams out against opening fire in peacekeeping. That decision is incredibly difficult one to make and it is very difficult in an urban environment because soldiers are thinking, “If I open fire, who else am I going to hurt?” How many times did I see instances of our soldiers not firing when under fire because of the possibility that children or women would be caught in the crossfire? That tactic was used by our opposition. There is huge inhibition to opening fire, and the decision to do so has to be made in milliseconds by our young men. By the way, I worked with some young women on operations, but not in the infantry. When that decision and those actions are judged, it is in some courtroom, warm and nice with time and lawyers. A judgment is being made about a decision taken by someone who is panicking like hell.

**Richard Benyon:** Fifty years ago.

**Bob Stewart:** My right hon. Friend is right; it was taken a long time ago. We must remember that most of our young men were 18 or 19 years old. They were kids. My soldiers looked so young that they could have been in year 9 or 10 at school.

Firearms were used as a last resort. On the yellow card it says, in capitals:

“FIREARMS MUST ONLY BE USED AS A LAST RESORT”.

That was drilled into us. A challenge had to be given before someone could open fire, unless doing so, it says on the yellow card, would increase the risk of injury or death to others or oneself. That challenge was clear: “Army. Stop or I fire.” Again the yellow card is specific: opening fire was allowed only if lives were endangered by someone firing a weapon at a soldier or someone they were protecting, or if someone was planting or throwing an explosive device—the card specifically mentions petrol bombs. One third of my platoon were injured by petrol bombs. One third of my platoon were injured by petrol bombs in 1970 on the streets of Londonderry, at the Rossivil Street/William Street junction—one third burned, and we had not opened fire at all. And nor did we. If someone is driving at a soldier, that soldier is allowed to open fire. Finally, if a terrorist has killed someone or is in the act of killing someone, a soldier can open fire if they cannot make an arrest in any other way.

**Luke Pollard:**
We could only open fire with aimed shots, not with machine gun fire; we did not do it automatic. We had to use “the minimum force”—that, again, is on the yellow card—and we had to be careful that we did not hit innocent people. That little phrase stopped so many British soldiers from firing, particularly in Belfast on the Falls Road.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recall, as I do, it includes the Labour Government as well—are giving those guys get-out-of-jail cards. So many of our veterans are veterans and who I am trying to represent, it seems like they do. To the men and women who to a court. “I felt rotten, because I agreed with them, but you Members of Parliament doing to help us? You sent us there. You gave us this bloody card and said that if we used it and acted in accordance with it, we would be protected.”

Now, our soldiers need protection. They need our protection. How can soldiers, policemen and members of the Ulster Defence Regiment—some representatives of that regiment are here—be considered in the same light as a terrorist? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury said, those guys went out to kill; we went out to save lives. There is a huge difference in intention, and we have to sort this matter out. Terrorists did not give a damn who they killed. I have held people dying—women and young girls, including one 18-year-old girl who happened to be a Catholic. They did not give a damn who they killed, and it was terribly upsetting.

Our men and women who served in uniform require us to act. We need a statute of limitations for Northern Ireland veterans. It is absolutely right that we have a statute of limitations for people serving outside the UK, but what is the difference? Someone putting on a uniform was more likely to be shot in Northern Ireland than someone doing it in Iraq or Afghanistan. I can tell you that in Northern Ireland, our casualty rate was pretty big. The casualties we had in Northern Ireland outstrip the casualties we have had in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not just that: there were people who were really badly injured. I had three who lost their legs.

Colleagues, we cannot consider our servicemen and servicewomen in the same light as terrorists. I am ashamed that our Governments—I say “Governments” because I include Labour, the coalition and our present Government—are, as our servicemen and servicewomen see it, complicit in a witch hunt against them. These are old soldiers. Many are in their 70s—I will get there in a couple of months. In the Army, when we really wanted to sort something out, people would be told, “Get a grip.” It is time that our Government and our Ministers got a grip.

5.9 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I do not think there is any Member of this House who does not have a deep affection for him. He is held in high esteem, and his was probably one of the most powerful contributions many of us will hear over years in this House. It starkly lays out the challenge we face. We spend a lot of time in this House bantering over years in this House. It starkly lays out the challenge we face. We spend a lot of time in this House bantering with one another, sharing bonhomie and referring to those who served as gallant men, but we have just heard the cries and calls for help. No matter how well we wish to dress on 11 November to honour those who have honoured us, we have just heard the challenge to us as parliamentarians: the job is not done. It is okay honouring those who have honoured us, but when our men need us—and they do—we have to act.

The debate has come at a most opportune time. Members of the House will know I made comments publicly last week expressing my deep disappointment at the sounds coming from the Ministry of Defence, which envisages legislative protection for armed personnel, but not those who served in Northern Ireland. Mrs Moon, you know me. We serve together on the Defence Committee.
[Gavin Robinson]

You know the history, you have heard the stories and you know the experience of people who have lived or served in Northern Ireland. They deserve our support.

I have enormous time for the Minister of State, but he should not be here today. We cannot talk as a nation about our commitment to those who served us, yet delegate anything that happened in Northern Ireland to the Northern Ireland Office. When we as a country established an armed forces covenant and said we had a commitment to those who served, it was not cavedated. We did not say, “One system for those who live in England, Scotland and Wales, and another for those who live in Northern Ireland.” We did not say, “If you happen to serve in Northern Ireland, you will be treated as less than someone who happened to serve overseas.” When we talk of sacrifice, we recognise it as such. It does not come in different grades or forms that require different responses.

I read the response to the petition—I commend the petitioners and the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore), who opened the debate admirably—and the Government are right when they say that any proposal should be consistent with the rule of law. They are right to say that criminal investigations and prosecutions are a matter for police and prosecuting authorities, which act independently of Government and politicians. They are wrong, however, to fail to seize the challenge here for us. We set the rule of law in this country. As parliamentarians, it is our duty to set the parameters through which our prosecutors and police operate.

We have a problem. The Government say that they will consult on proposals. They await the responses on the Stormont House agreement or the proposals for a statute of limitations, but what consultation was there on the odious on-the-runs letters? None, but the political proponents of the IRA asked for them, the Labour Government gave them, and the Conservative Government continued to operate the scheme. John Downey, responsible for the Hyde Park bomb, walked free as a direct result of that on-the-runs scheme. There was no public consultation. There was no putting it through the prism of the Northern Ireland Office to see what the views were among political parties or the general public. The deal was done. The Government provided the cover that terrorists sought; they did not ask us. They did not ask the public in Northern Ireland for their view. They did not ask for people’s views on whether it was appropriate to give a get-out-of-jail-free card to those who attempted to destroy society in Northern Ireland.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I have a constituent who served on many tours under Operation Banner. He highlighted to me one line of the Government response, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned:

“We do not support amnesties or immunity from prosecution.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree with my constituent’s response, which was:

“Hiding behind legal process, when in fact everyone and their dog knows that it is a political process (otherwise how could it be possible to amnesty terrorists at the same time you are prosecuting soldiers) is entirely incomprehensible”?

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful for that intervention, and for the contribution from the hon. Lady’s constituent veteran. He is right. I do not support an amnesty. I will never support an equivalence between terrorists and those who stand up for law, order and democracy in our country—never. They are not the same, and when we published our report 18 months ago, no member of our Defence Committee supported an amnesty either. When a statute of limitations was proposed, the ask was very constrained. First, it recognised that the state had to discharge its duty under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. As the hon. Member for Beckenham said, all those cases were investigated. Secondly, there was no preclusion of a second prosecution if there was “new and compelling evidence”. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) was right to ask what was meant by that.

The distinction between an amnesty and a statute of limitations is acute, and much more thought needs to be given to it. Where the state has discharged its duty and there has been a satisfactory investigation, and a veteran has been told, “Sir, you have no case to answer. Go home,” they should be allowed to get on with their life, unlike the scores and scores of terrorists in Northern Ireland who live with no fear of prosecution.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I entirely concur with every word the hon. Gentleman says. I pay my respects to our veterans, and also to him for the courage he shows in Northern Ireland, because there is still a threat today; let us make no bones about it. Does he agree that fear of more terrorism is preventing the judicial process from taking its lawful course and bringing these thugs to justice? That is what I think, and certainly what the veterans I speak to think.

Gavin Robinson: I think the hon. Gentleman is right, and I thank him for his comments about me. I am one of the lucky ones; I am a member of a party of 10 MPs, but I have not faced what my colleagues or their families have faced. I have not faced the threat that they endured for many years, and I am grateful for that. Society in Northern Ireland has moved on, but fear of invoking something that is wrong cannot be right. It cannot be the path that our Government walk.

There was some suggestion over the weekend and last week that Northern Ireland’s not being included in the statute of limitations was the Democratic Unionist party’s fault. I have heard said over the past six months, “The confidence and supply partners are holding back the expansion of the proposal,” but let me nail that myth today. Anyone who serves with me on the Defence Committee knows my position and that of my party. We will never stand up for an amnesty that equates terrorists with service personnel, but we will work for and provide the protection that our service personnel need.

I have a letter here that we sent to the Prime Minister on 31 October. It states: “As we have done in the past, we reiterate again that we will vigorously oppose any attempt to introduce an amnesty for the criminal actions of illegal terrorist organisations. There can be no legal or moral equivalence made between the armed forces acting under the rule of law and terrorists who acted outside the law. Affording legal protection in the form of a statute of limitations or similar mechanism to the armed forces and those who served alongside them including the Royal Ulster Constabulary, will not mean an amnesty for anyone. This was the conclusion of the Defence Select Committee and it is a point of view we will uphold.”

I simply want to share that for clarity.
We should not be surprised that we face this challenge. Governments of various hues find it within their gift to respond to the calls of armed service personnel only when the cost of not doing so is higher than the cost of doing so. That is true in my experience of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland, where we have Ministers who, because of their political prejudice, say, “I’m sorry; the armed forces covenant does not apply here.” I have shared with Members in this House correspondence from Michelle O’Neill, the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, who wrote just that when she was Northern Ireland’s Minister for Health—“The armed forces covenant does not apply here.” She was wrong. It was a national commitment. Do we have a Government who are prepared to enforce that national commitment and repay the trust and the service of our armed forces personnel in Northern Ireland? No, we do not—at least, not yet.

When Joanna Lumley campaigned for Gurkhas who sought the right of abode in this country if they had served before 1997, the Government said no continually. It was only in the dying throes of the Gordon Brown Government that they finally acquiesced, because not doing so was causing them too much trouble in the run-up to an election. That is not how we should honour those who protected us.

I want to share some context—for the rest of this debate, not for the rest of my speech—about Bloody Sunday. I recognise entirely what was said at the start of the debate, and I will not go into specifics about the day. I will not breach any of our conventions about what is sub judice and what is not; it would be inappropriate to do so. Bloody Sunday happened on 30 January 1972. Anyone who has taken the opportunity to look at the Saville report and to hear from families and understand the hurt that they have experienced, and who heard our Prime Minister at the time say that it was unjustified and unjustifiable, knows that it was a dreadful day.

In Northern Ireland, 1972 was a dreadful year, with more murders than any other; 258 people lost their lives. I will take the three weeks before 30 January. On 5 January 1972, Keith Bryan of the Gloucester Regiment was murdered by the IRA. On 12 January 1972, Royal Ulster Constabulary Reservist Constable Raymond Denham was murdered in his workplace by the IRA. On 13 January 1972, an Ulster Defence Regiment sergeant and site foreman was murdered by the IRA. On 21 January 1972, Private Charles Stentiford of the Devon and Dorset Regiment was murdered by the IRA. On 27 January 1972, in Creggan in Londonderry, Sergeant Peter Gilgunn and Constable David Montgomery of the RUC were both murdered by the IRA: a Catholic sergeant and a Protestant constable serving together, and returning to their RUC station together, having sought to protect and defend the integrity of our society together, both murdered by the IRA. On 28 January 1972, Constable Raymond Carroll was murdered by the IRA. Only when we hear those names and the range of dates—this was only three weeks—do we recognise the circumstances, and the pressure under which people were serving.

The hon. Member for Beckenham focused his remarks on the yellow card, which was not the be-all and end-all. It was revised in the 1980s because it was seen to be too complicated. When Lee Clegg was convicted in the 1990s, it was changed again. We have taken evidence on the yellow card not being worth the paper it is written on, yet those were the rules of engagement that our service personnel were told they had to abide by.

We had Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday and the Clauzy bomb all in 1972. During the three-week period that I mentioned, four members of the IRA were killed. Two innocents were killed as well. On 8 January 1972, Peter Gerard Woods was murdered by loyalists in north Belfast, and on 18 January 1972, Sydney Agnew, who would have been a constituent of mine, was murdered by republicans. I do not see there being a fair reflection of that circumstance, that atmosphere or that experience in any court process today. I am deeply disappointed by the level of legal support that the Ministry of Defence offers service personnel in that situation today.

I am deeply disappointed that, unlike the scores of groups that our Government fund to research cases on behalf of victims and their families in Northern Ireland, our Ministry of Defence does not take an overview from one case to the next; that it does not contextualise the support that it gives; and that there is no equivalence between the documents retained by our state, those used against our state, and those that protected our state.

As I say, today’s petition is opportune. All the contributions this afternoon have asked us to do more. When I asked the Attorney General on 31 January this year whether any proposal brought forward by the Government would apply equally across this United Kingdom, he not only said yes, but said that it would be plainly wrong to do anything else. I hope he is right.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for his initiative in bringing this debate to the House and for how he presented the case. I also pay tribute to all the subsequent speakers who, without exception, made powerful and well-informed contributions. I wish briefly to answer, perhaps in part, the question posed by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in his extremely powerful contribution. He asked, “What are you doing about it?” I can perhaps throw a little light on one aspect: what the Defence Committee has been doing about it. As has been mentioned several times already, we have produced one inquiry report and had a response to it from the Government, and now we are working on another one. Why are we having to do a second report and a second inquiry into what amounts to largely the same material? It is because of something rather strange that happened when we produced our first report.

Our first report was produced in April 2017; it was the seventh report of the 2016-17 Session and it was entitled “Investigations into fatalities in Northern Ireland involving British military personnel”. I will read one of its conclusions and one of its recommendations. The conclusion was:

“It is clear from the experience of these legacy investigations that, unless a decision is taken to draw a line under all Troubles-related cases, without exception, they will continue to grind on for many years to come—up to half-a-century after the incidents concerned.”

We had to wait a long time for the Government’s reply, which eventually came in November 2017—later than the two months that one normally expects. Their comment underneath that conclusion was:
"The Government notes the Committee’s comment."

More interesting and positive, however, was the Government’s response to the recommendation that I am about to quote from our original report:

“Accordingly, we recommend the adoption of”—what we called—"Option One—the enactment of a statute of limitations, covering all Troubles-related incidents, up to the signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, which involved former members of the Armed Forces. This should be coupled with the continuation and development of a truth recovery mechanism which would provide the best possible prospect of bereaved families finding out the facts, once no-one needed to fear being prosecuted."

In other words, we recommended adopting what might loosely be called “the Nelson Mandela model” from South Africa.

The Government’s reply was as follows:

“While the Government believes that the most effective option to address Northern Ireland’s past is to implement the proposals set out in the Stormont House Agreement, the Government acknowledges that others have different views on the best way forward, including approaches such as that proposed by the Committee, which do not involve recourse to the criminal justice system.

As such, the Government intends to include within its forthcoming consultation on the draft Northern Ireland (Stormont House Agreement) Bill a section entitled ‘Alternative approaches to addressing the past’. This section of the consultation will discuss alternative ways forward and include a description of the Committee’s recommendation. The consultation will invite respondents to give their views on ‘the potential effectiveness and appropriateness of alternative approaches such as amnesties and a statute of limitations’—

I am glad that the Government did not identify the two as being the same because, as the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made clear, they are not—

“to address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past’. Following the consultation’s conclusion, the Government will consider all views carefully to inform next steps.”

I need hardly remind anybody present that that did not happen. When the consultation appeared, there was no reference to the suggestion of a statute of limitations. The only explanation I can find for that is that somebody behind the scenes lobbied someone in a position to make the decision for the option of a statute of limitations to be excluded. I know only what I saw in a newspaper report, which I think came out very recently, suggesting that there was some correspondence between the Prime Minister and other Cabinet Ministers.

What I have no doubt about is that, when our original report came out, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), subscribed to the answer that we received in the response. Subsequently, sadly, for medical reasons he temporarily had to leave the Cabinet and there was a change of personnel. I suspect—I put it no more strongly than that—that with a new Secretary of State, the people behind the scenes in the Northern Ireland Office felt, perhaps, that they had a better opportunity to kill a proposal that they may feel would somehow endanger what has been constructed to stop the terrorist violence of the past. I am unconvincing that that is an honourable approach for the Government to have taken.

I make just one other point; so many people wish to speak that I do not wish to labour things too much longer. The reason why we immediately started another inquiry was that, when we saw that the consultation had come out without our recommendation even being included for consideration, we thought, “Right—if that’s the way the Government are going to play it, we’ll start the whole process all over again.” That is what we are doing, and we are at an advanced stage in our re-examination, although this time we are examining the wider picture of service personnel at risk of prosecution as a result of other conflicts in foreign countries.

I do not wish to underestimate the importance of the progress that the Government appear to have made in moving towards a solution to that problem at least. I welcome that, and I hope that they do not get cold feet about what they are proposing to do. It is good that the Government have worked together. In that respect, I pay tribute to both the previous Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), and the Defence Secretary before him, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), both of whom took this issue very seriously. Under the previous Defence Secretary, a special unit was set up in the Ministry of Defence, and the Committee had long advocated privately, to try, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Neil O’Brien) said, to get a grip on this matter once and for all. As a Committee, we met informally with that unit.

Progress is undoubtedly being made. Understandably, we have the problem that people on the paramilitary side of the argument do not want any of their personnel to be pursued for anything that they did, but they are adamant that the servants of the British state must be prosecuted until the end of time. People who rightly point out that the servants of the British state had very different intentions from the terrorists naturally take the view that they do not want any equality, as we have heard expressed forcefully in this debate, between service personnel doing their duty and terrorists trying to destroy innocent people.

However, in one respect I slightly disagree. This is just my personal view, but I believe that one must focus on a piece of legislation that has not yet been mentioned: the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Under that Act, even if someone killed 50 people they cannot go to jail for more than a maximum of two years. I speak with some understanding of the position of families who lost a loved one under such unexplained and unresolved circumstances, because my family were caught up in the holocaust of the second world war.

I must say that I was not terribly keen on statutes of limitations for Nazi guards from Auschwitz, for example, but if somebody had said to me then, “There is no question of anybody serving a sentence that is in any way proportionate to murdering somebody, and in any way a recompense for doing that,” would I have felt that it was perhaps more important to bring out the truth than to try to send someone who does not want to tell the truth to jail for a derisory two years? I think I would have wanted more to discover what had really happened.

That is the strength of the Nelson Mandela approach, which I understand that at a certain point we can heal society only by drawing a line, and find out the truth only by removing the threat of prosecution. When someone knows that as a result of prosecution the maximum sentence that can be imposed is so risibly
disproportionate and lenient compared with the crime of which they would have been found guilty, it is easier than ever to understand that that is the civilised and sensible way forward.

5.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for raising the issue and giving us a chance to participate in and contribute to the debate. I declare an interest as a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment; I was also in the Territorial Army for 14 and a half years.

When the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about the yellow card, I was reminded that some 45 years ago, when I joined the Ulster Defence Regiment as an 18-year-old, the yellow card was preached into us every night before we went out. We were very clear about what it meant. I thank the Lord that I never had to fire a gun in anger—I never had the opportunity to do it, was never in a position to do it, and was never confronted with it.

All hon. Members have spoken exceptionally well, but I hope that they will not mind if I pick out the hon. Member for Beckenham, who displayed the leadership and courage that many of us respect him for—not only in uniform, but as a Member of this House. He probably does not understand just how much we all consider him a friend. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), whose speeches—like his work on the Defence Committee—always have an honesty and calm that give us a chance to participate. I will not leave out my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) either: his speech was exceptional and encapsulated what we all think.

How topical it is to hold this debate the day after a memorandum was leaked from Downing Street that states, according to The Sunday Telegraph, that veterans should be offered “equal, rather than preferential, treatment” relative to other groups covered by the plan to investigate historical killings. Let us consider that idea for a moment.

For all things to be equal, rather than preferential, all inquiries should start from the premise that an act of terrorism with a determined and planned aim is very different from the events under investigation. That is not our starting point in these investigations, so things are not equal—never mind preferential.

These incidents began the second that there was a call saying that there was a suspicion of terrorist activity. These actions took place when soldiers looked to their officers for advice and relied on their training and on the yellow card, which said that if they were attacked, it was okay to defend themselves, as the hon. Member for Beckenham clearly illustrated. The events took place when unlawful terrorists were attempting to kill these men—to all intents and purposes, at the very least.

The actions of soldiers were a reaction to the environment around them—an environment that did not allow them to relax for even a second, lest they lose their lives or see their brothers murdered by the very people who now cry out for preferential treatment and a rewrite to justify what is unjustifiable. That is why I have to say respectfully that, yet again, the Prime Minister is flawed in trying to rationalise and equalise everything in Northern Ireland. It grieves me to say that about my Prime Minister—our Prime Minister—but that is the way I feel.

Some things are not equal and cannot be equalised. We cannot and must not attempt to equate a soldier in uniform with a terrorist. Yes, feel free to equate the murders of the IRA with those carried out by loyalist terrorists, which were outside the law, unacceptable and despicable. But to try for a second to allow republicans to rewrite our history and equate the actions of a soldier, carrying a legally held weapon and instructed to uphold law and order, with the actions of someone with an illegal weapon and a determination to bomb and murder his or her way to a political endgame is horrifying. It must end here.

Soldiers are not asking for equal or preferential treatment. They are asking our Government and our Prime Minister to acknowledge that they put them into life-changing and horrific situations and asked them to carry out actions to save us in this place from having to deal with evil men with bloodlust and a desire to wipe out any and every person who dared to consider themselves British—I am British and very proud to be British—or even to speak with those who did. Soldiers are asking the Government, who trained them and told them what was and was not acceptable in times of attack, and us in this place—in this debate and all the other times we have spoken on these matters—simply to be honourable and do right by them. That is what this debate is about: doing right by our soldiers. It is important to put that on the record.

I served on the streets of Northern Ireland. I listened to the unforgettable wails of mothers when they were told that they would never see their children again. We have all lost loved ones and friends—that is no secret in this world. My cousin Kenneth Smyth was a sergeant in the UDR and a former police special; he was murdered with his Roman Catholic friend Daniel McCormick. No one was ever made accountable for that.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who is giving a very moving speech. As we have talked so much about equivocation today, does he agree that it is simply not acceptable for a Prime Minister of this country to stipulate that veterans should receive equal treatment—not preferential treatment to other groups in the conflict, such as the IRA, but equal treatment? That demonstrates a mindset fundamentally out of keeping with the justice that this is all about.
Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for intervening. What annoys me is that of the three people who killed my cousin Kenneth and Daniel McCormick, one blew himself up with an IRA bomb—he is in hell today—and deserves what he has got—the second died from cancer, and there is one left. None of those three was ever made accountable for the murders of Kenneth and of Daniel McCormick, a Roman Catholic who just happened to have served with such courage and credit; I where I have lived all my life and where others in this Chamber have served with such courage and credit; I know that many of them will speak in this debate.

I lost friends in the police as well. I think of wee Stuart Montgomery, who was only 18 and just out of the police academy; within a month, he was murdered outside Pomeroy with his friend. Where is the accountability for those people’s families and loved ones? Of the four UDR men killed at Ballydugan, I knew three personally and from an early age. Where is the accountability in this process for those who murdered those four UDR men? One person was made accountable for a small part of it, but the man who murdered them was never held accountable—although he met his just deserts in Downpatrick shortly afterwards while in the process of trying to blow up more soldiers, so in a way justice has happened.

These repulsive murderers have the freedom to justify what they did—and, indeed, to walk these halls, free from prosecution and free from real justice. I hear them again and feel a searing pain as I read the latest example of the fact that our Prime Minister has no idea of what we have gone through as a nation in an attempt to wrap up legacy issues and tie a bow around them.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks with real emotion. That rawness shows how poignant these events can be, many decades after they occur.

I want to share a very powerful sermon that I listened to in church yesterday. It was given by a military chaplain, who spoke about the 50 to 60 bodies discovered each year in the fields of France and Belgium, and about the services that he undertakes to ensure that those people have a proper burial and that their descendants are contacted. It reminded me of the ongoing pact that we have, as a nation, with the people who have served and given their lives for us. Does the hon. Gentleman share my constituents’ instinctive concern and sense of shame that the approach being taken, with soldiers being prosecuted many years after events, diminishes the ongoing pact between a nation and those who risk their lives for it?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady; I do not think there is anybody in the House who has a different opinion.

Like others in this House, I make myself available to help the Prime Minister understand what is clearly beyond her at this point. Upholders of law and order do not deserve to be treated equally with murdering scum of any religion; they deserve to be treated differently, because it was different for them. For those in uniform, it was different from any other case. I stood shoulder to shoulder with people in service then, and I stand shoulder to shoulder with them now. I want them to know that, which is why the debate is so important—other contributions will underline that.

The blood of those I loved, and of those who gave their all in service to Queen and country, cries out not for equality, but for truth, honour and real justice from those who should know better. We in the House should know better, and there is no excuse for this memo, or indeed for any deviation from supporting people who were not terrorists but law enforcers. There is a very clear difference in my mind and others’; they are not equal. Take them out of the same bracket, and be honourable.

5.50 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I do not seek to add to the incredible speeches we have heard today, particularly from individuals who served in Northern Ireland—I did not. I want to add just two or three new points and not take up too much time.

People are very well aware of my general feelings on this subject, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for securing the debate. This is not a niche issue for people who have served or who have a particular interest in this subject; it is as basic an injustice as this House has seen for some time. I urge colleagues to think about what more can be done.

When the Good Friday agreement went through in Northern Ireland and the settlements were reached, it was deemed more politically tolerable for soldiers, servicemen and policemen to take the hit, rather than other sides. That is why we are where we are—it was simply more politically tolerable for politicians to do that. I urge my colleagues to do whatever is required to ensure that this Government do not continually speak warm words that ultimately mean nothing, and to hold them to account on behalf of people who need it.

I know the Minister personally and none of my remarks is directed at him—he only recently took over the job. This weekend’s revelations were genuinely shocking, with the Prime Minister’s clear mindset that people who served should receive treatment “equal to, not preferential to” other groups in the conflict. Many people have written to me in the past two days on the back of that specific sentence. The situation reminds me of three years ago, when I took part in a Westminster Hall debate, with the then Minister for the Armed Forces, who is now the Secretary of State for Defence, on the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. That is the point I want to make: nothing ever seems to change. We say a hell of a lot in this place. I remember her looking up at me and saying, “No one hears from these investigative teams first”, but that morning I had been on the phone to someone who had heard from those private investigators first.

MPs who recount their experiences are not turning oxygen into CO₂ for the hell of it. This actually means something; this is people’s everyday experience. I know the responses will be, “We’re thinking about this and that,” but there has been a clear moral failure by the Prime Minister and the Northern Ireland Office to deal with the situation. I am afraid that it simply cannot go on.
As many hon. Members have alluded to, this is not about whitewashing history. I urge colleagues to be really careful with the language they use. It is not colleagues who said this but last Thursday the front page of The Guardian read, “Mordaunt to give veterans amnesty for battle crimes.” Nobody has ever asked for that, and nobody has ever thought about it. That is deliberately inflammatory wording, designed simply to prey on the grief and the hell that some families and veterans are going through. In this case, an amnesty is not appropriate in any way whatever. On its own, a statute of limitations cannot work. There can be no time limitation on serious criminal behaviour.

Last week, we began to see the beginnings of a presumption not to prosecute, which is the sort of area we should be working in. That came from the Attorney General.

Bob Stewart: I entirely endorse what my hon. Friend has said, with one proviso: if someone has been investigated by a competent authority, I think a statute of limitations is perfectly acceptable.

Johnny Mercer: My hon. Friend raises a really interesting point. The checks and balances being discussed by the Attorney General relate to a rigorous investigation. Comprehensive and new compelling evidence should provide a safeguard. The problem with a statute of limitations per se is that where clear evidential thresholds are met—when it comes to clear wrongdoing—we start entering difficult areas. We should at least start a conversation about it, but the Prime Minister has specifically asked my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee not to do so.

Dr Julian Lewis: I would not put it quite as explicitly as that, but it was certainly implicit in the way that our report recommendation was first put forward and then somehow mysteriously excised from the Government’s agenda. May I try to resolve the pointed issue and ask my hon. Friend whether he would accept the term, “qualified statute of limitations”? That is what the Government seem to be putting forward, but I think there is no time limitation on serious criminal behaviour.

Johnny Mercer: Around this legal language, there are ways out of this. We can do that without using inflammatory terms or mechanisms that people would not accept with.

I am afraid that what gets lost in a lot of this is that some victims and families get this impression because the Attorney General relates to a rigorous investigation. There is nothing more disingenuous than using their grief, anger and sense of unjustness to propel a totally false narrative, which is used simply to extend the conflict.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Like many hon. Members who have spoken and raised their concerns, I have heard from veterans in my constituency and from people who are deeply affected by this issue. The longer this goes on, the more we create a difficult narrative that cuts across people who have served, people who have family members in the armed forces, and ordinary members of the public who are dismayed and angry at the situation. We also have recruitment issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that this poses a very serious threat to people we ask to serve, by suggesting that we will not protect them?

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

Johnny Mercer: Those are really good points from my hon. Friend, whose constituency contains Royal Marines Condor and Arbroath.

I want to express why I and may others feel so angry about this. There are many burning injustices in this place, but we have been here before. The greatest worry is that this will never end. It will be a problem not just for this Government but for the Government who replace them, these veterans and veterans of the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, until a Government or a Prime Minister decides to show just one quarter of the courage that we asked our men and women to show daily in those conflicts. I do not want to overdo it, but it is pure cowardice for someone to say they are on the side of those who served—the bravest of the brave—and give a conference speech to rapturous applause, and in private to say the complete opposite. I urge colleagues to stand with me in doing everything we can. This is not a game; the nation and how we defend ourselves is at stake. I pay tribute to those who served out there and gave such inspiring speeches today. There is no more to be said on this subject, but there is a hell of a lot to be done. That is what people like me are looking for.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to have served under Mrs Moon’s.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) that there is not an awful lot more to be said, but I will say it anyway because the e-petition demands that we reiterate and re-reiterate the reality of what has been going on. I congratulate those who started e-petition 243947 on their work, and my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) on his very good and powerful speech.

I have not spoken about this subject pretty much since I left Northern Ireland, but I listened with great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), and I brought back an awful lot of memories of Northern Ireland. I was a young platoon commander like the ones he described, not that long out of Sandhurst; I do not know that I learned very much at Sandhurst; it all had to be re-learnt after I left. I remember large periods of incredible, intense boredom, followed by massive periods of panic and fear—literally almost alongside each other. I lived in
the masonic car park with my company, in an old caravan that had a hole on the side by my bed. I was damp the whole time I was there, because the rain lashed through the whole of the winter.

I remember the fear in my young guardsmen’s eyes when they were caught up in an incident. It came not from the idea of what might happen to them, but mostly from what they might have to do, and what they might get wrong. The yellow card, which was drilled into us before we left, scared the living daylights out of me before I even set foot in Northern Ireland, and I know it was the same for my young soldiers. As my hon. Friend said, some of them were 18 years old and had very low levels of education. They were in an urban environment that they had never been in, and they were armed and acting in support of the police, as a quasi-police force. We expected them, in a moment, to make the kind of judgments that highly paid, brilliant legal brains would stall at. Those young men had to make those decisions for themselves, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, and they bore the burden by themselves—too often, without support.

I take the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View made. I have a real problem with our relationship with the armed forces in this country. We expect them to do the right thing and go to war. I still remember my father, who served with great distinction in the second world war, telling me that many of his friends who had been incarcerated in prisoner of war camps for a number of years came home to find their families in near destitution, because the then War Office had decided that, as they were living comfortably in a prisoner of war camp, their pay could reasonably be cut in half; they would have no need for the other bit. It forgot that, or did not even bother to find out whether, they had dependants living at home, who, by the end of the war, were in deep poverty and starving. I am afraid that that is the kind of relationship that we have percolating through after every single operation. We treat our veterans of Northern Ireland in much the same way.

I am sad to say that the Government, and previous Labour and Conservative Governments—I am not necessarily speaking of mine, but all Governments—are determined to find the reasons why we cannot do things, but never the reasons why we can. Our servicemen and women get put in operations, genuinely risk their lives, and do not complain about it. They do that on the general assumption that a paternal Government would oversee their wellbeing if they were wounded, if their families were hurt or if they ended up in a difficult situation in which they might be prosecuted.

Too often, in the slightly politically correct conversations that take place outside Parliament when Ministers are interviewed, they start equivocating about who was doing what. We get equivocation about the terrorists versus the soldiers. I did not serve with particular distinction, but when I was in Northern Ireland, I had to find a cache of a large number of armour-piercing Garand—an American rifle—rounds. I thought to myself that they were on their way to somebody who would do a snipe on one of our patrol vehicles. They would have gone clean through it, and would have killed anything on the inside. Terrorists were setting up another attack, like those the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) described, on people who were there to keep the peace. There is no equivalence between those who go out to kill people, and those who go out to defend people but end up having to kill people as a result. The one stands above all else. That is what we do as soldiers. That is what we know we are about.

That is particularly the case with British soldiers, who I still believe to this day are the best trained, and most reasonable and decent, troops on the ground. They always operate with a real sense of restraint. They do not even have to be taught about that; there is an instinctive sense of restraint that comes from their training. We now find that 90% of the cost of these prosecutions is going on 10% of the incidents. Where is the natural justice in that?

I want to raise an issue. I had friends who never came back, and I want to talk about Robert Nairac. I saw him a few nights before he went to Northern Ireland, and he never returned. What happened to him—a brave young man trying to do his job—was horrific. He was not just killed but tortured and dismembered. He disappeared, and no one has ever owned up to knowing where his body is buried. No one has owned up to doing it, although we have a fair suspicion of who it was. His poor parents have gone to their grave with no conclusion to the sad tragedy of Robert Nairac. He is typical of many people, both soldiers and non-combatants, who disappeared in Northern Ireland. Where is the justice in the fact that families such as his will never see those responsible prosecuted for their filthy, foul actions? There is no natural justice in pursuing British soldiers, rather than the people who tortured and killed Robert Nairac, because it is easier.

Worse than that are the letters of comfort that were given out. I find it astonishing to discover that letters of comfort are given quietly to those on the run. Why are they on the run? Because they have committed atrocities and cannot come back. That is about Government and perhaps about the Belfast agreement—but in a funny sort of way, not really; otherwise, that would have been done publicly. It would have been shouted from the rooftops if it were an equivalent process, but it never was.

As my hon. Friends have said, the endless nightmare for soldiers who served in Northern Ireland was that they were three times more likely to die than the terrorists who they were after. The likelihood of death was greater on the streets there than in other operations before or since. Why was that? Because our soldiers walked through the streets in plain sight, and were targets every single moment that they were there.

I recall the sheer fear I felt as a young platoon commander on the first commemorative Sunday of Bloody Sunday in the Bogside. I remember having to keep a patrol safe as over 100,000 very angry people talked about tearing them limb from limb if they found them, and knowing that at any stage, any one of my patrol could have been taken away, never to be seen again. Those were the kinds of decisions that one had to make. That still resonates, even today.

Ultimately, I simply urge the Government to do the right thing—to recognise that it is quite ridiculous that soldiers who have been cleared in previous investigations should ever be pursued again, unless there is absolute, categorical and clear evidence, beyond what is needed to meet the burden of proof, that they have done something that nobody knew about before. These men,
who are in their 70s, should never face that, but they do. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham mentioned one man who was arrested by a stream of police cars and taken away immediately, as though he had committed some foul offence and might run. The overcooking—the nonsense—that the police get up to on these matters sometimes is quite ridiculous.

I do not want these men to be treated differently, but I say quite categorically that if there is to be a statute of limitations, it must cover veterans of Northern Ireland. I understand that those who served in other operations may well be covered, but because Northern Ireland veterans served in the United Kingdom, UK law will override anything that the Government might do. That absolutely cannot be allowed.

I give my Government fair warning that I will simply not put up with shunting Northern Ireland veterans to one side while seeking some sort of general political cover, as though we had done something for them. We will not have done anything unless we deal with all our servicemen and women, who have had the bravery and courage to do anything unless we deal with all our servicemen as though we had done something for them. We will not put up with shunting Northern Ireland veterans to one side while seeking some sort of general political cover, that the police get up to on these matters sometimes is quite ridiculous.

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There is debate about whether it should be stated that prosecutions must be based on new evidence, or whether there should be a statute of limitations. I would be content with observing this one principle: no servicemen or women who served in Northern Ireland should be arrested and pursued, particularly after cases against them have been dismissed, simply because the police have nothing better to do with their time than find out whether they did something. It is time that the Government acted on that.

I urge the Minister and his colleagues to recognise that those of us who served in Northern Ireland did not ask to. We did not, in a fit of passionate patriotism and bravery, suddenly volunteer to go there on our own. We were told to go there because we were soldiers. That was the command. We were told that it was an operation; it was not some other affair, as we now seem to hear. We went on that operation—Op Banner was an operation—and did our duty.

Bob Stewart: It was Operation Banner. Soldiers did 28 days in Northern Ireland and were awarded a General Service Medal, which is the recognised medal for serving in combat zones such as Malay, Aden and Borneo. Northern Ireland is on the clasp for the General Service Medal, so it is an operation like any other.

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree. The other day, I made the point that I have an Operational Service Medal for Rhodesia, as it was then, and a General Service Medal with a clasp for Northern Ireland. I assume that the operations were recognised as equivalents—I do not remember a distinction. I was never told that I was on a subset of an operation in Northern Ireland, but that I could go on a real one in Rhodesia. I can tell hon. Members, without a shadow of a doubt, that Northern Ireland was the more frightening of the two.

The Minister must say loudly to all those who have the privilege of running Departments, and even to the Prime Minister, that this simply cannot stand—it is a deep injustice. Those who served need us to stand up for them, because they have nobody else. Their families need us to stand up for them, because they have nowhere else to go. Successive British Governments have too often failed their servicemen and women because they were mealy-mouthed about how to support them. That has to stop; we must now protect them.

I have one last phrase for the Minister. When natural justice collides with the law, we must change the law to protect those who protected us.

6.16 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for securing this debate and for his excellent speech introducing it. I also pay tribute to all those who have spoken. It is humbling to be surrounded by so many hon. and gallant Gentlemen who served in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

To introduce briefly where I fit in, I did three tours of Northern Ireland. My first was in December 1978. I remember the sergeant-major at Sandhurst saying to me as I left, “Sir, you have time to say ‘Happy Christmas’ to your parents. Then get your arse over to Northern Ireland.” I said, “Right. Thank you very much indeed; that’s my Christmas gone.”

I went over on the ferry with a great friend of mine. The difference between England and Northern Ireland was absolutely marked at that time. I remember getting off the ship, on which we were treated as normal, free civilians—we enjoyed a drink and a chat—and getting into an armed vehicle, which was affectionately known as a pig.

We then drove to our base in McCrory Park, just off Falls Road, where I spent the first six months of my three tours. As we drove to McCrory Park, I simply could not believe that we were in the United Kingdom. It took a huge amount of appreciation for it to sink in that our country was that divided by hatred and violence, as I would soon witness.

On 20 July 1982—after my tour—Lieutenant Anthony Daly was leading the changing of the guard with his men; he was going from Hyde Park barracks to his duty when the IRA detonated a nail bomb in Hyde Park. Another bomb was laid at Regent’s Park that afternoon, which killed members of the Green Jackets, who were performing there. I am sure that we all remember the ghastly pictures of horses and men splayed across the road. Today, there is a commemorative stone for Anthony Daly on the spot where it took place. John Downey, a convicted IRA killer, got off because of a letter of amnesty.

We have heard many examples from hon. Members of how the IRA seems to get away with the atrocious deeds it did, but members of our armed forces who go out to save lives—this point was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), among others, and I wish to reiterate it—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On John Downey, the alleged Hyde Park bomber, is it not correct that when he produced his so-called “comfort letter”, the judge abandoned the trial? The Government continue to maintain the fantasy that such letters have no legal power or strength, yet a judge in charge of a murder trial abandoned it when one was presented. Does that not drive a coach and horses through the Government’s case?

Richard Drax: It drives a tank through the Government’s case. My right hon. Friend speaks with his characteristic verve and clarity. He is absolutely right: so it does.
[Richard Drax]

To speak personally, my view over many years—I am 61; I served nine years in the Army, and I have been here for nine years—has been that politicians generally, although there are noble exceptions, all of whom are in the Chamber today, simply do not understand the armed services. They just do not get it. I have a huge amount of respect for the Minister, whom I know well; this comment or any I make are not aimed at him but at all Governments, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said. What is the first thing that happens when a Government come to power and are short of power? They cut the armed services. That is intentional madness. The armed services are an insurance policy that require money to be invested in them. We hope that we do not have to use them but, in places such as Northern Ireland, we do.

If I recall this correctly, we had about 35,000 troops in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles. We would be pushed to mount an operation on a similar scale today. In fact, as has been said, it would probably be impossible. My message to the Government therefore concerns all those things we say about our armed forces. We repeatedly hear from politicians how they respect the armed forces covenant and all such things, in the Chamber and outside, but when it comes to the crunch, our armed forces are let down.

I will touch briefly on Royal Marine Al Blackman, whom I and many others managed to get out of jail after he had served only half his time. This example is similar to one given earlier. None of the circumstances in which that man was forced to operate—it was in the most appalling conditions in Afghanistan—was taken into account. It is easy for politicians for who have no experience of operational service to sit in an armchair with their gin and tonic and say, “I condemn that man or woman for what they did.” They fail to understand the total picture in which our brave men and women all too often serve.

Mention has been made of the yellow card. I, too, learned the yellow card. I recall—I hope that I have my old memory working—that one of our main concerns was the vehicle checkpoint. We were told, and this often happened, that young boys would challenge Army checkpoints. Young kids and teenagers, not related in any way to terrorism, would try to drive through our checkpoints for a laugh. We discussed that on many occasions—“How do we deal with that?” A car is coming at us at 50, 60 or 70 mph, we have one, two or three seconds to react, and we have a gun in our hands. We think, “Is this a terrorist? Is this a young boy fuelled by drink? Who is this guy?”, then bang, the car goes into the checkpoint, possibly killing or seriously injuring one of our soldiers or a member of the civilian population, and the car drives away. Are we allowed to shoot the person in that car then? The answer we all came to was no, because that person is no longer an immediate danger to us or to anyone else. Had someone been shot in that car, there would have been a kerfuffle, a court case, accusations of murder and all the rest of it.

This point about restraint has been made, but I make it again: those I served with, and the many others I served alongside, all showed restraint, in particular in riots or very dangerous areas. A soldier’s instinct, when going to someone in trouble, is to help; it is not to kill, or beat up. A number of times I saw my guardsmen go to the aid of those on both sides of the community, and as we built up a relationship, the number of cups of tea offered often increased a little, because most Irish people are decent. A few rotten apples, sadly, spoil the barrel.

I absolutely agree with everything that has been said by all right hon., hon. and gallant Friends so far. I urge the Government to stop doing what we do best, which is talking; that is over now. We cannot go on betraying our brave men and women; we tell them that they are brave, but when they come home, we sell them straight into a court, throwing them to the mercy of lawyers et al. That is not on. Finally, justice delayed is no justice at all.

6.25 pm

James Heappey: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, although I missed the beginning of the debate. I hope that he will join me in asking the Minister to address the Stormont House agreement when he responds. I rather fear that the reason why we are in this predicament with Northern Ireland veterans relates to the terms of that agreement—in relation to historical investigations, in particular.

James Heappey: I very much agree. My hon. Friend is right that the political angle to this is most unfortunate. I will come to that later in my remarks.

I am deeply concerned by any suggestion of equivalence between the actions that I and so many other service personnel have taken on operations and the actions taken by terrorists out to take life illegally. There is no equivalence. In the debate on the urgent question on Thursday morning, the Government deployed a disappointing line, which seemed to suggest that comfort letters would not endure and, if they did not, all would therefore be open to prosecution. Although that corrects an imbalance, by definition it creates an equivalence, in which we say, “At least both sides can be investigated and prosecuted.” That is simply not acceptable: there is no equivalence.

Mr François: David Griffin, aged 78, is a Chelsea pensioner. In 1972, he killed an IRA gunman who was about to assassinate one of his comrades. He was investigated at the time and exonerated. Forty years later, he is being investigated again by the PSNI, who will not tell him his fate. He was an Irish Catholic born in Dublin—
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but if this is sub judice we should not be pursuing it.

Mr Francois: It is not sub judice. I am sorry, Mr Bone: I completely understand your intervention, but this is not before a court and the case is in the public domain. Very quickly, David Griffin has no comfort letter—he has no comfort of any kind and is in utter limbo, although he is a Chelsea pensioner. He is very worried. Why do our Government allow this to happen?

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no equivalence whatever. Whether the other side can now be investigated again or not, it is simply unreasonable, wrong, immoral and a breakdown of our covenant with our armed forces that we allow the investigation of those who have served to continue.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) gave an amazing speech, in which he reflected that there was a time when his blokes thought that he had thrown them under the bus because they were required to go to court. It was clear from his speech the pain that he felt having to look his soldiers in the eye and break that news to them. I suspect that if those soldiers were watching you, Colonel, this afternoon they would have been proud to see someone take the responsibilities of command so seriously after years when their watch is done. I found that very powerful.

All of us who have had the great privilege of carrying a commission in Her Majesty’s armed forces, and to have had command of soldiers, sailors and airmen, will relate strongly to the pain that my hon. and gallant Friend so clearly felt. Even now, in another career many years later, we feel we are letting our riflemen, guardsmen and private soldiers down. That is what motivates us all to be here.

The first time I was involved in any such process was in Kabul in 2005, about a year after I had been commissioned. We had been involved in the use of lethal force following a double vehicle-borne suicide bombing. Throughout the afternoon and evening that followed, and overnight as we stood on the perimeter, we went back through everything we did and thought tactically whether we did the right thing. When we got in the next morning, having been relieved, and the first thing we got was a date with the Royal Military Police’s special investigations branch, I was pretty close to throwing punches. But I understand that is a necessary part of applying lethal force on the battlefield. We are trained to live and operate by a higher standard, and we should have nothing to fear when the investigation starts immediately on the back of the application of force like that.

Two years later in Basra, and two years after that in Sangin, that process was commonplace—in Sangin, as a battalion adjutant in the most contested Herrick tour and battle space, I was responsible for an awful lot of initial investigation processes. The immediate debrief could not be accurate, because adrenalin was still coursing through the veins of the riflemen who had been involved. They were emotional because, very often, their friends had lost their legs or had been killed in the very same mission. There was confusion about what had happened because the fog of war was all around them. As they relayed their individual testimonies about what had happened that afternoon, night or morning, often that did not match up with the testimony of the rifleman who had stood immediately next to them, fighting the same contact.

In the process of that investigation, the company second-in-command drafts a report and comes up to the adjutant, who has a look at it; he then goes to the brigade and the legal adviser looks at it, and the special investigations branch has a look at it. Meanwhile, that rifleman would have been deployed on three, four, five, six or seven more patrols in the following seven days, in which there would have been more kinetic activity in which they would have applied lethal force, and on the back of which there would have been more reports by the company’s second-in-command, coming up to the adjutant and so on and so forth. Very quickly, all the details of those missions start to mesh into one—so much so that we had riflemen go to the coroner’s hearings six or nine months or a year after a tour and not recognise the contemporary report of what happened that night when they applied lethal force.

I make that point because days or a year after, those servicemen cannot remember exactly what happened—it is a natural part of how we deal with our mental health to seek to delete and overwrite. How on earth can we turn round to them decades later and replay to them accurate reports made at the time as part of the evidence against, and ask them to account for themselves to try to establish their innocence once again? Some of us have had that moment when a threat is perceived—in a split second we have to decide whether to apply lethal force because our life or the life of another is in danger.

Richard Drax: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. I wonder whether the judge would have access to such reports by the IRA terrorists.

James Heappey: My hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right: the IRA did not keep such records, which is a great unfairness. Those of us who have had to apply lethal force have taken the decision in a split second, hoping that all our training, instincts and everything we have learned since first going into the Army, Navy or Air Force will mean that we take the right decision. We know there is a danger that we might get it wrong and we need to know that, provided we are in the rules of engagement and can say squarely that we perceive the threat to be there, our Government will stand behind our actions.

The written ministerial statement that may come tomorrow is great news for those of us who served on Operation Herrick and Operation Telic. My tours of Afghanistan in 2005 happened more than 10 years ago; my tour to Basra in 2007 was 10 years ago; and at the end of October, my final operational tour to Iraq and Afghanistan will be more than 10 years ago. That statement should be, and will be, huge comfort to tens of thousands of veterans who served in those theatres.

As somebody who served in Northern Ireland, an MP with many constituents who served in Northern Ireland and a former rifleman with many ex-riflemen friends who served in Northern Ireland, I’m all right, Jack. We must remember that it is not okay—in fact, it makes it worse—to have one statute of limitations that applies to the conflicts that are most on people’s conscience, while ignoring those who fought in Northern Ireland in just as trying circumstances, as we have heard so many times this afternoon. They are left behind.
The legal premise on which my former comrades served in Northern Ireland is not their fault. The failings of any investigation that happened at the time is not their fault. Conversely, the quality of the investigations at the time, which allows vexatious politicians and lawyers to pore over the detail and challenge it decades later, is not their fault. The political situation in Northern Ireland is not their fault. The fact that they pulled the trigger in Northern Ireland rather than in the Falklands, the Balkans, Iraq or Afghanistan is not their fault. The fact that the Government have not yet done anything about this is also not their fault.

This situation cannot drag on any further. A universal statute of limitations across all theatres is required now. This is not an amnesty. Our armed forces are not above the law—we ask of them higher standards than we do of those in civilian life. When they fall short, we punish them in a way that would be draconian in any civilian employment setting. If we understand some of what they do, as many of us here do, we understand why they deserve protection. We ask that they accept unlimited liability in defence of our nation. We must accept the political liability that comes with saying, “Come what may, we’ve got your back.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. Two right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak. I will start to call Front-Bench speakers slightly before 7 o’clock, so I ask that they bear that in mind. I call Owen Paterson.

6.37 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I will follow your instruction to be brief, Mr Bone, and I apologise to you and to Mrs Moon for not requesting to speak in advance—I was unaware that the debate was taking place.

I will try to keep it simple. As someone who was shadow Secretary of State for three years and Secretary of State for two years, and who did business in Northern Ireland when I was younger and continues to go there, I sincerely thank all those who have spoken very movingly, including my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I thank them for everything they did and all the people they represent—the hundreds of thousands in the military and the security services who did their level best to maintain the rule of law. That is what it was all about. It was the most extraordinary insurgency, which aimed to break the rule of law.

I was in Northern Ireland only 10 days ago, talking to a guy who had worked his way up the ranks and was a senior officer. He was emphatic that he did not want any amnesty, because what he and his men did was defend the rule of law. We all support the Belfast agreement, which is an extraordinary achievement. Politically, it had the support of both main parties in the UK, both main parties in the Republic of Ireland and both main parties in the United States. It would never have begun without all those brave servicemen, policemen and members of the security services who maintained the rule of law. It is very much thanks to them that Northern Ireland is in such a better position now.

We know that during the talks, the Blair Government, like the Major Government before them, had to take some hideously difficult decisions. We know about the infamous letters, but releasing prisoners only two years on from their conviction, after due process, of the most appalling crimes was an incredibly difficult decision. At the time, that was much bigger for many people than the issue of letters, but it has been worthwhile, and we should thank all those who gave it their best. Bluntly, those brave men and women made it impossible for those pursuing the republican cause to get their aims by violence, and made them realise that the only way to pursue their aims was by peaceful means. That was a remarkable achievement.

Today, many people wish Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland. The political campaign has not gone away. As United Kingdom representatives, we have to be careful that innocent old soldiers do not get drawn into the current political process. That is what is happening. I will be very careful given your strictures about matters that are sub judice, Mr Bone. I talked to an elderly veteran who had several pieces of paper from military legal departments exonerating him for an incident, yet a rural police force, which I would have thought had better things to do, sent half a dozen police cars around to arrest him. That shows that this has got completely out of hand. There is a real sense of grievance and injustice. Bluntly, the Government have to wake up to this and put it right.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wells (James Heappey) and for Beckenham spoke very well about how tiny the moments were in which the decisions that may lead to these processes were made. I am one of the probably very few human beings who has read every page of the Saville report. I was responsible in Northern Ireland for the various reports that came through from the peace process, which, obviously, we published and reported to Parliament. I doubt any country in the world could have gone to such lengths and such expense to try to get to the truth. On many parts of that terrible event, Saville is very clear—he establishes what happens—but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells said, there are several tiny moments on which Saville struggles for page after page. In some instances, he does not come to a conclusion. These were split-second moments back in 1972. As my hon. Friend said, people could not remember them a week later, so how on earth are they going to remember clearly new facts?

There are merits in a statute of limitations. I leave that to lawyers, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who is about to speak. It would be completely wrong if the Secretary of State for Defence made a statement tomorrow that there is one regime for soldiers who served in one theatre—Afghanistan or Iraq—and a completely different regime for those who served in Op Banner. That would be absolutely wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, politicians at the time sent these young soldiers to do their duty—to defend the rule of law. Those soldiers were not told, “Sorry, guys, but in 30 or 40 years’ time you’re going to have a different regime because, bluntly, you will be drawn into a contemporary political campaign.” That is what is happening.

This is my appeal to the Minister. There are two things the Government could do now. First, we do not need statements in Parliament or new legislation; we
need an absolute, categorical guarantee from the Government that those who have legally valid pieces of paper exonerating them for incidents in the past will not be subject to a further process unless there is absolutely clear new evidence. Secondly, allied to that, there must not be any process in which a fair trial is not allowed. That is a very long-standing principle. I am not a lawyer, but there has to be clear, absolutely categorical new evidence, and an absolute assurance from the prosecuting authorities that the trial will be fair. It would be very good if the Minister confirmed that.

6.45 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) on leading this extremely important and topical debate. I always speak with some trepidation in debates such as this. I cannot speak with the authority of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) or my hon. Friends the Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) or for Wells (James Heappey), who have been there and experienced it. In fact, I am afraid I am one of the lawyers of whom various hon. Members have spoken. However, I venture to say a few words simply to make the point that the abhorrence of lawfare is not confined to those who have served or are serving, but extends also to lawyers.

I am a barrister. Lawyers—those who serve at the Bar—have an honourable profession. They speak for people who cannot speak for themselves. They often speak for the downtrodden—people who need to be listened to but are not listened to at all. Members of the Bar are fiercely independently minded. They will say things that are not popular, and they will argue for causes for which no one else wants to argue. But sometimes they are put in the position of having to prosecute law, or defend law, that is wrong. When law is wrong, it is the job of Ministers to act and of Parliament to approve; the lawyers are put in the wrong position, and it is for us in this place to act. So it is in this case. The law needs adjustment to right this great wrong.

I feel very strongly about this matter, albeit from a different perspective from those who have spoken so movingly. I first came across this aspect of lawfare in 1993, when Lee Clegg, who was mentioned earlier, was on trial for murder. I was about 14 and, being probably an uppity little fellow, I wrote an essay saying how unjust I thought it was that someone who had made such an uppity little fellow, I wrote an essay saying how unjust I thought it was that someone who had made such a narrow distinction in such trying circumstances was being tried for murder.

Of course, that was a highly controversial case. I will explain why I say that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham for giving me his yellow card, upon which that case turned. Article 5 reads:

“You may only open fire against a person:

a. if he is committing or about to commit an act LIKELY TO ENDANGER LIFE AND THERE IS NO OTHER WAY TO PREVENT THE DANGER. The following are some examples of acts where life could be endangered, dependent always upon the circumstances”.

The third of those examples is “deliberately driving a vehicle at a person and there is no other way of stopping him.”

The issue of driving at a person was the point on which the Clegg trial turned. That is an incredibly narrow distinction. That is why the case was so controversial at the time, and why it remains controversial to this day. The court was dealing with someone who at the time would have been in his teens or early 20s and under enormous pressure. My understanding of the case is that he fired shots as the car approached, which would not have been subject to action, and then a nanosecond later fired a shot through the rear windscreen, which sadly killed somebody. That was the point upon which the case turned.

Those who have served may well say, “The rules are what they are, and you have to accept and work within the rules.” Of course I entirely hear that. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells pointed out, if it is difficult for someone to make that incredibly narrow distinction at the time, when they are frightened, under enormous pressure, young and inexperienced, how much more difficult is it 50 years later for them to remember how they felt and the reason they acted as they did?

Everyone should be clear. Neither I nor anyone else in this House is saying that servicemen should be above the law, but there is no moral equivalence whatsoever between servicemen who are involved in an unplanned incident—and who are sent to do a job, to protect people and to do their duty—and terrorists, who set out to do none of those things and who maim and murder. No one suggests that servicemen should be above the law. They do not want carte blanche to do whatever they like; they want recognition for the incredibly difficult and trying circumstances faced by servicemen who are young, inexperienced, frightened and under severe pressure, including having to make split-second decisions.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and raising a number of notable points. I must declare an interest, in that my husband is a veteran. As a psychologist I have worked on trauma, which affects the brain after an incident. On trauma processing, in many circumstances it is extremely unlikely that people will have an accurate recollection. Surely that must also be taken into account in these cases.

Robert Courts: That is an outstanding point, and I entirely agree. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells made a similar point. I have not prosecuted or defended military cases such as these, but I have in cases of affray and assault. As any criminal barrister will say, if there are 10 witnesses to an affray, there will be 10 different versions of events. There are many reasons for that. Part of it is perception, but is also because everyone is involved in a stressful situation, and that has an effect on the brain. Of course, that is exacerbated over the course of months and years as time passes.

We would probably accept that there may be a need for investigations, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said—I am glad he has returned to his place—it is a question of natural justice. If someone has been acquitted after being investigated by a proper competent authority, there comes a point where there should be no further investigations into those historical matters. That is close to the double jeopardy rule, which used to exist except in certain circumstances.
I do not accept that there is no way in which the law can deal with these cases. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for indicating that a statute of limitations or a presumption not to prosecute—which amount to much the same thing—will be considered for those who served outside the UK. However, it would be incredibly difficult to apply two different regimes to a soldier who had happened to serve in both Iraq or Afghanistan and Northern Ireland. It is difficult to see how that would be a logically sustainable position for justice and the law of the land.

The point, essentially, is this: those who have put everything on the line for us are entitled, at the very least, to us drawing a line at a point after which they know they will not have to fear a knock at the door in the night. They should not have to fear a cavalcade of police cars taking them away when they are in their old age. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her indication, but there are ways in which this matter can be dealt with. A statute of limitations would provide a safeguard for exceptional circumstances and new evidence; the same is true of a presumption not to prosecute. As I observed in our previous debate on this issue, civil and military operations in Northern Ireland were highly stressful, so that requires them to operate within the rule of law, and that requires them to operate within the rule of law, in accordance with the rules of engagement. Military operations in Northern Ireland were highly stressful, so a high level of training was central to ensuring that discipline was maintained.

Many Members have spoken about the restraint they had to exercise during their service in Northern Ireland, and they described their exemplary behaviour. The actions of a few in the armed forces during Operation Banner, which, in the case of the Bloody Sunday killings, Prime Minister David Cameron described as “unjustified and unjustifiable”, let down their colleagues and made the overall task more difficult. As I said, we must be careful about the language we use. In March, the Northern Ireland Secretary was forced to issue an apology to the House for what she described as her “deeply insensitive” comments on state killings in Northern Ireland. She referred to her “inaccurate” comments on the actions of soldiers during the troubles. In her statement to the House, she declared:

“What I said was wrong. It was deeply insensitive to the families who lost loved ones in incidents involving the security forces.”

She added that any evidence of wrongdoing should be “pursued without fear or favour, whoever the perpetrators might be.”—[Official Report, 11 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 74.]

That is crucial to the ongoing peace process. If we do not want to lose sight of what we have achieved in Northern Ireland and what we continue to want to achieve, we must be sensitive to the victims on both sides.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: No, I will not. We also must have confidence in the ability of the police and the judiciary in Northern Ireland to serve the people.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: I have already said that I will not.

Mr Francois: Why not?

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has every right to not give way, as the right hon. Gentleman knows. She has indicated that she does not want to give way.

Carol Monaghan: We must have confidence in the police and the judiciary in Northern Ireland, and it is for Stormont to reform those institutions if they are not serving Northern Ireland well. I certainly hope—I hope hon. Members will join me in this—that Stormont will function fully again in the future.

That said, none of us wants former or current members of the armed forces to be treated unfairly when accusations of wrongdoing are made. I hope that we all support the idea of justice being done, and that includes fairness to our armed forces personnel, who are entitled to due process in answering allegations made.

Our armed forces have our gratitude for defending us and our values in traumatic and highly stressful situations. The then Prime Minister David Cameron made a statement to the House on 15 June 2010, the day the Savile report was published. He said that “the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear: there is no doubt; there is nothing equivocal; there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong.”—[Official Report, 15 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 739.]

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked about the yellow card—he has his yellow card here—and about the rules of engagement that had to be adhered to...
during any conflict. However, Prime Minister Cameron went on to quote the report’s finding that “none of the casualties shot by soldiers of Support Company was armed with a firearm...in no case was any warning given before soldiers opened fire.”

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: No, I will not.

David Simpson: The provos did not give many warnings.

Carol Monaghan: I sincerely hope the hon. Gentleman is not comparing members of our armed forces to terrorists.

James Heappey: He is not; you are. You started it.

Carol Monaghan: These investigations must not be time-constrained. The idea that after a set period of time a line is drawn under past incidents does not support the families’ need for resolution.

The Chair of the Select Committee on Defence made some interesting points in talking about the report. He mentioned a truth recovery mechanism. Such a mechanism will need to investigate incidents; regardless of what we do, there has to be some sort of closure for families and for victims.

Dr Julian Lewis: Does the hon. Lady accept that the great advantage of the truth recovery mechanism is that by removing the threat of prosecution, the truth is more likely to come out, so families will find resolution?

Carol Monaghan: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point; I do not think any of us here want to see 70-year-old former soldiers going to jail. However, in order to get to the truth, there has to be investigation. He has to acknowledge that part of this is tied up with the Belfast agreement; we cannot start to make changes without having an impact on that agreement.

In 2012, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary inspected the role and function of the Historical Enquiries Team. The subsequent report was highly critical of the Historical Enquiries Team, and in 2013 the PSNI announced that it would review all military cases relating to the period from 1968 until the time the Good Friday agreement was signed, in order “to ensure the quality of the review reached the required standard”. Surely, when we know the original investigations were flawed—they did not include full, written witness statements and did not take account of all the ballistic evidence—we cannot object to attempts to make changes without having an impact on that agreement.

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In many ways the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for bringing the debate.

It is a common truism and an error when people pay credit to debates by saying they are the most important they have heard; on this occasion, that is not an exaggeration. We have been privileged to hear some extraordinary testimony, not just from eye witnesses, but from people who have made it their business to study this awful, tragic business over many years. On the one hand, we have the ugly, unfortunate and unacceptable image of pensioners being dragged from the golf course, but on the other hand we have to look into the eyes of those whose relatives were killed. I am glad that some people mentioned the victims; it is important to mention them.

We have to ask ourselves: are we seriously saying that at no stage, at any time in the 30 years of Operation Banner, no person in British Army uniform committed murder? I think we all know that there were incidents: four soldiers were convicted of murder during that period, although in one instance, the case was then downgraded to manslaughter. All four were sentenced to life imprisonment; all four were released by the royal prerogative after fewer than five years; and all four rejoined the British Army. I have not met a single person serving or formerly serving in the armed forces who has anything but contempt for soldiers who break their oath and act outside the area that they should; that is incredibly important. We have to recognise that there are two sides. Obviously, we have sympathy for people.

In many ways the hon. Member for Southport said that over 3,000 people died during the troubles; that bears repetition. Probably the most chilling statistic I have ever heard is that more than that number have killed themselves since the Good Friday agreement. There have been over 3,000 suicides in Northern Ireland. That tells us something about the continuation of the horror that has bitten deep into the soul. When we hear the testimony of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I call him my friend—we realise how raw these emotions still are. That is why, if at all humanly possible, we have to be as dispassionate as we can be. That is not easy. We are talking about points of law, and about decisions that we take in this House that will echo down the ages, for years to come; we have to be cautious and careful in what we say.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) rightly referred to the chain of command, which has not been discussed overmuch. In some cases, ordinary troops—ordinary soldiers, ordinary sailors, ordinary airmen and women—were let down by the chain of command.

That brings me to the extraordinary speech of the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I was privileged to be in the House on the incredible occasion when he quoted Kipling: “it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Chuck him out, the brute!’

But it’s ‘Saviour of ‘is country’ when the guns begin to shoot’.

I never saw active service, but from the emotion that he showed on that occasion and has shown today, I felt the real importance of the debate.

The hon. and gallant Gentleman spoke about the yellow card. There has been much discussion about the yellow card, but I think we need to have a few facts. It was amended six times between 1969 and 1972, and
was never, ever intended to supersede the common law, which gives the right of self-defence. Nobody ever suggested that the yellow card was anything other than a source of guidance; it did not supersede the common law. The central point is that the law has to apply to all on every occasion.

Mr Francois: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Stephen Pound: I happily give way to the former Defence Minister.

Mr Francois: I am grateful. Will the hon. Gentleman remind us what colour the card was that the IRA had to abide by before opening fire on civilians or servicemen?

Stephen Pound: If there is one thing that has echoed round this Chamber today, it is that there is no equivalence between troops and terrorists—between people who wear uniform and people who wear balaclavas. I am sorry, but I resent the right hon. Gentleman’s point; I think that the attempt to make it demean the quality of the debate. He was a very distinguished Defence Minister, and he speaks with good sense on many occasions, but that point was slightly unworthy of him.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) rightly spoke about the rule of law. He mentioned something that I still find almost too agonising to think about: the on-the-run letters. I can do no better than quote Mark Durkan, formerly of this parish, who said that he felt those letters blighted the peace process “with their penchant for side deals, pseudo-deals...shabby deals and secret deals”—[Official Report], 26 February 2014, c. 249.

That is recognised on this side of the House, and I hope on all sides. They are not defensible, and we would not seek to defend them today.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) raised an extremely interesting point, to which a few others have referred: the almost unbearable tension in the mind of a 17, 18 or 19-year-old person who knows that at any minute something they do could have lethal consequences—against them, or from them. That is the point: it is just as terrifying for them to think of the damage that they could do to someone as to think of the damage that that person could do to them. The point that the right hon. Gentleman made about that fear is something that only people who have been in that situation can understand, and I am grateful to have heard what he said. The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the environment of tension, and that is something we need to talk about.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) widened the horizons of the debate, and talked about IHAT and lawfare. I have no case to make for lawfare or those ambulance-chasing scoundrels of lawyers who somehow manage to infest the lower reaches of the legal system like foul leeches, trying to take blood from our people. I have no time for those people who came up with trumped-up cases to embarrass, and in many cases threaten and terrify, people who had served with distinction and honour. I have no time for those leeches, those bloodsuckers, those ambulance-chasing scumbags.

Robert Courts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: I have another half-dozen insults to go. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has today confessed in public to being a lawyer, so if he wants to redress the balance, I happily give way to him.

Robert Courts: I was enjoying listening to the stream of insults, but I feel I should perhaps stick up for my profession and reiterate my point that lawyers just interpret the law as it stands. It is for Ministers to act and Parliament to make the law. If there is a problem, as many of us will accept there is, it is for us to deal with it, and not blame the lawyers.

Stephen Pound: Fabrication of evidence is not a legal requirement of the British Parliament. We have not at any stage stated in part 3, paragraph (27)(b) of schedule 2, “thou shalt go forth and fabricate evidence”. There are more than enough cases in which people have fallen way short of the high standards of the legal profession so gloriously and elegantly exemplified by the hon. Gentleman.

I have heard many speeches by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and have never regretted a second that I spent listening to them, because he speaks with profound good sense. Today he gave us the slightly unusual perspective of the man in the caravans in the mosaic hall car park. Again, he made the point about the impact of tension on young people. Often in groups of young people in such a situation, one person tends to lead, and if there is one person in a platoon with a contemptuous and contemptible attitude towards the people they are supposed to be protecting, that will often ratchet up. A person will say things that are unforgivable, and other people in the platoon, in the file, or on the mess deck, will be uncomfortable about challenging it. That happens with human behaviour. It is human. It is important to realise it.

We cannot mention too often the name of the late Captain Robert Nairac. We are at the anniversary of his disappearance and death. What a tragic waste of a life it was. It was one of 3,500, by all means, but he was a man who gave his all—everything—for his country, and I do not think that we can forget him.

I found it extraordinarily moving when the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) talked about arriving, as a newly commissioned officer, in civvies on a civilian transport into Northern Ireland, and finding he was in a country—a place—he did not recognise. Is that not part of the problem? On our relationship with “John Bull’s Other Island”, we often do not understand Ireland or the Irish. It would have been even more honest of the hon. Gentleman to say that he had, perhaps, some preconceptions about Ireland, but he had the courage to say that when he arrived there, he did not realise the full nature of the place he was coming to. I think that that shock was dramatic, and what he said was much to his credit.

Richard Drax: The shadow Minister is covering all the speeches that have been made with great eloquence. Can he give us a flavour of where Labour stands on what, as he clearly indicates, is a very emotive issue?

Stephen Pound: Yes, indeed. The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that our shadow Secretary of State for Defence has issued a statement via something called Twitter that sets out the whole thing. Rather than take up the time of the House, which is short, I shall send him across a copy, which enunciates precisely what we are doing.

The hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) talked about Kabul and about a wider situation. However, what the issue comes down to, and the point I shall
finish on, is that I am not precisely sure what the petitioners are asking for. They are not asking for an amnesty or for a statute of limitations, because, frankly, justice cannot be time-expired. We cannot have a situation in which a crime is a crime one day and, a few years later, is not, so I should like to know exactly what they want. If there is one thing that everybody in the Chamber agrees on, it is that this matter has been dealt with without sensitivity, subtlety or good sense. The idea of a cavalcade of police rocking up at someone’s house at 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning is indefensible. We cannot go there, so we need to be much more sensitive. If we cannot turn the clock back to investigate the cases that happened at the time, and if we are going to investigate them now, we need to be sensible. Above all, we need to remember two groups: the veterans, by all means; but also let us never forget the victims.

7.16 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): It is good to have you looking after the second half of the proceedings, Mr Bone. I echo the repeated compliments and tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore), who led this tremendously important debate, kicking off a set of angry, passionate and emotional contributions from colleagues, many of whom have served in Her Majesty’s armed forces. Even those who have not—including those who have confessed to being lawyers—have been incredibly understanding and sympathetic to the plight being discussed today. My hon. Friend rightly started by saying that the vast majority of the deaths caused during the troubles were caused by terrorists. A very small minority can be attributed to the actions of Her Majesty’s armed forces.

I should pause to say that, if we listen to veterans, we find that this is not just a question of prosecutions, although those are difficult enough and require a lot of support. It is also a question of the repeated and unending investigations before any prosecution ever happens. In fact, in most cases no prosecution has ever happened but people live in fear of the knock on the door, the cavalcade of police cars turning up at 5 am, and the repeated interviews, which are often, as my hon. Friend the Member for W ells (James Heappey) eloquently put it, about events that not only happened 30, 40 or 50 years ago, but happened in the fog of war, and were hard to remember, define and record a few days later, let alone decades further on.

We heard a catalogue of worries, concerns and justified outrage, and comments about betrayal, injustice and lawfare. I thought one of the most telling contributions was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who intervened early in the debate. He is a former Green Jacket and I think his words are all very well; politicians, as we all are here, are good at words. I am afraid that as a lawyer—I do not have a law degree, and I am not a lawyer per se, so we cannot debate a lawyer here this afternoon, and rightly said that we must do more before, in what I thought was one of the more affecting moments, reading out a very sombre and sober list of names of some of the people killed in just the few weeks before the Bloody Sunday outrages.

The hon. Member for Southport made it in kicking this thing off. I will try to ensure that not only do I leave a few moments for my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who is extremely careful in his views. He said that we need to make progress, and in fact we are making some progress, but we have not made nearly enough. He then mentioned the Nelson Mandela approach; I will come back to that point, because it is central to any potential action and solution that we may want to come to later.

I will try to ensure that not only do I leave a few moments for my hon. Friend the Member for Southport to respond, but that at the end of this I suggest some actions that can be taken. People have said repeatedly, and rightly, that words are all very well; politicians, as we all are here, are good at words. I am afraid that as a Westminster Hall debate, this does not end in legislation per se, so we cannot debate a law here this afternoon, but we can at least start to move toward actions, and I hope to be able to propose some of those.

Richard Drax: Can my hon. Friend tell us why the Prime Minister excluded Northern Ireland veterans from the 10-year exclusion policy, which I believe is hopefully going to go forward?

John Penrose: This was discussed at some length in the urgent question last Thursday, and a number of hon. Members have made the important point during the course of this debate that was also made on Thursday: for people serving on Operation Banner, it did not feel any different. It felt the same whether they were patrolling in Northern Ireland or in Basra or Afghanistan—it did not matter where. The surroundings might have been different, but it felt the same and they felt under the same pressures. I think everyone here has rightly made the point that morally, as a society, we owe Northern Ireland veterans the same debt of gratitude. Not only that, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells said,
no matter what happens, “Come what may, we’ve got your back.” No matter where people served, that should be the outcome.

The difficulty, to answer the point by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), is that in strict legal terms, the legal basis on which the service took place differs depending on whether it was abroad or in the UK. Our challenge as lawmakers is to ensure that the outcome for our servicemen and women is the same. They may have to start from different places, but the destination must be the same; if we cannot do that, we will have failed, and failed really badly.

Gavin Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

John Penrose: Very briefly; I am conscious of ensuring I have enough time.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the Minister, because he conceptualises the challenge well: is he up for it?

John Penrose: I certainly am. I hope to come on to at least some initial comments about the actions we might be able to take as a Parliament, a Government and a society.

Mr Baker: Will the Minister allow me?

John Penrose: Very briefly, and then I must make progress.

Mr Baker: I am sure we are all concerned to get to root causes, so I hope the Minister will get to the Stormont House agreement.

John Penrose: That is indeed one of the points I will make when we come to the actions. I will briefly mention the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made one of the most emotional contributions; he served, I think, in Northern Ireland himself, and he is absolutely right in his enjoinder that we must all be honourable and do right by our veterans.

One of the most thoughtful examples of controlled anger of the afternoon came from my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who said that we must do more. I think everybody here would agree with that. He also said that we are not asking for an amnesty for war crimes and that a statute of limitations, pure and simple, cannot work because there should never be a time limit on serious criminal behaviour, although he also said that something around the announced presumption of non-prosecution looks promising. In a point that I think we would all echo, my hon. Friend was also rightly contemptuous of the false narrative of hope that the legal teams of the lawfare profession are using to manipulate victims’ grief.

I will not go through everybody, but I wanted to say that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) rightly stated the point I was just making: the fact that this is UK law rather than service abroad cannot be used as an excuse for failing to help Northern Ireland service versus service abroad. That cannot stand, and it is a deep injustice.

I am under pressure of time, so I will gloss over some of the other comments, but they were all valid. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset, himself a former Grenadier Guard, made the point that our words must match our actions, and he is right. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells, a former riflemen, asked how legal cases can justly be tried decades later, after the fog of war has passed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), himself a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and thus a man with personal experience of many of these policy issues, said something that, again, I think would be echoed rightly around this Chamber: no further legal process should happen unless there is clear and categorical new evidence, a point also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who said we should not go anywhere near what used to be called the double jeopardy rule, under which someone cannot be tried twice for the same offence.

What must we achieve? We must achieve an answer that will do several things. Of course it must work for veterans in the armed forces, but it must also work for former police officers, prison guards and wardens too. They are not in the armed forces and they work on a different legal basis, but the answer must work for them as well. It must work for innocent, peaceful Catholics and Protestants alike in Northern Ireland—people who have never served or wanted to serve, but were potentially in the line of fire from some of the actions that took place.

Our answer must work for the victims and the families of the victims. We have heard some of that, but it needs to be emphasised. Most importantly, it must work in court so that, when the inevitable legal challenges come from the lawfare brigade, this thing is robust and stands up; if it does not, we will have failed in our duty to protect our former servicemen and women. There is no point coming up with something that sounds great, but falls over the first time a clever lawyer pokes it in court. That will not stand.

Finally—I have treble-underlined this in my notes—our answer must draw a line and allow people to move on. It must allow not only the victims and the veterans, but the whole society in Northern Ireland, to draw a line. That is why I come back to the point made by the Chairman of the Defence Committee. There is not an exact comparison between Northern Ireland, which is a unique place, and South Africa, but there are many parallels. We must find some way of creating an approach that will allow people to get closure, truth and justice.

What I hope and expect we will do is, first, to publish very soon the results of the consultation so we can all see what people in Northern Ireland genuinely think about the details of the questions. Secondly, promptly after that, I expect us to announce the Government response, which must be actions, not words. The Stormont proposals are a starting point, but there are genuine concerns on all sides about the details of those proposals. They cannot stand as they are, but they are a good starting point and we need to work on the details of how we modify them so that we can bring forward a Bill.

The crucial thing is the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green: when natural justice collides with the law, the law must change. That is what we do here.

7.29 pm

Damien Moore: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the conclusion of this debate, Mr Bone. I thank all right hon., hon. and gallant, and hon.
Friends and Members for their contributions, particularly my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

We have a moral obligation to ensure that justice is done. That does not mean special treatment for veterans, but it does mean that if, for example, we are to have a statute of limitations, they are not excluded from it. They deserve fairness, justice and closure on this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 243947 relating to immunity for soldiers.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 May 2019

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM in the Chair]

Financial Exclusion: Access to Cash

[Relevant documents: Nineteenth Report of the Treasury Committee, Household finances: income, saving and debt, HC 355; and the Government response, HC 1627; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 12 March, on the Access to Cash Review, HC 2011; Twenty-ninth Report of the Treasury Committee, Consumers' access to financial services, HC 1642; and Correspondence with the Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to Access to Cash (dated 13 March and 2 May).]

9.30 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial exclusion and the future of access to cash.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Henry. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting our request to hold the debate. I also thank the Access to Cash Review panel, Joe Fortune from the Co-op party, the RSA, Responsible Finance, Hounslow Council, UK Finance, the Payment Systems Regulator, the Treasury Committee Clerks, Visa, Mastercard, the Financial Inclusion Commission, Citizens Advice, the Money Advice Service, Age UK and many others for their help in preparing for the debate. I mention them as an indication of how widespread the concern is and how much of a contribution many stakeholders are making. I also declare an interest as a recent nominee to become a new commissioner on the Financial Inclusion Commission.

There is considerable interest in the debate, so I will try to keep my remarks to about 15 or 16 minutes. I will set out some of the context; where progress is being made, which we should recognise; opportunities that we should seize, including a particular mention for credit unions; and the importance of joining up to move forward together. I will also cover the potential for and importance of future legislation, which the Government have so far resisted and I am sure the Minister will mention.

As the map of stakeholders shows, access to cash is an important and complex issue that can no longer be primarily led by industry. We need a joined-up plan led by the Government that looks at the cost and effectiveness of our wholesale cash infrastructure, programmes for digital inclusion and incentives to diversify services based on complex customer needs. We need to ensure that those services can reach people, and that we both maintain free access to cash for those who need or choose cash as their method of payment and ensure that cash remains accepted.

There is clear cross-party interest, which the Chair of the Treasury Committee referred to in her recent correspondence with the Chancellor. That gives me hope and confidence that we are setting the right foundations for moving forward and addressing the challenges ahead.

Fundamentally, the bigger picture is inclusive economic growth and flexibility, security and choice in personal and family finance. Cuts to welfare, stagnant wages and economic instability in the last decade have exacerbated the precarious position of millions of people in the UK. The Money Advice Service estimates that 22% of UK adults have less than £100 in savings, which makes them highly vulnerable to a financial shock such as job loss or an unexpected bill. Some 8 million people rely on high-cost credit to pay essential household expenses, and may frequently turn to alternative forms of finance such as high-cost lenders or illegal loan sharks to make ends meet. Recent Financial Conduct Authority data shows that the number of high-cost short-term credit firms has decreased, but the volume of lending has increased.

Ten years ago, six in 10 transactions were made in cash, but by March 2019, that number had halved to three in 10. The combined number of banks and building societies is falling steadily, and in 2018, the number of free-to-use ATMs fell for the first time in 20 years.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. The issue of free-to-use ATMs is particularly acute in rural areas, and especially among elderly and more vulnerable communities, which should be at the forefront of the debate.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman puts on the record an important and well-made point, which I will address later.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that when banks, such as the Yorkshire Bank in Royton, close with an agreement to relocate a cash machine in a convenience store, the agreement must be that it will remain free to use? In Royton, just a year into that agreement, a charge has been introduced.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the situation in his constituency, and that is why regulation is increasingly important. In future, the issue will be maintaining not just access to cash but free access to cash.

There has been a renewed focus on the issue of the last bank standing in a community. As Sian Williams of Toynbee Hall pointed out, however, when we get to that point, it is often too late. There is an urgent need to join up, particularly in areas that are more likely to be left behind. Financial institutions have not tended to talk to one another, so towns and communities have been left with piecemeal and inaccessible financial services.

The change has not been orderly. In the RSA’s excellent report published earlier this year, “Cashing Out: The hidden costs and consequences of moving to a cashless society”, the situation is described as a “disorderly dash from cash” with “a misalignment of incentives between individual banking institutions seeking to shed their costly physical infrastructure...and the needs of...thousands of communities that remain reliant” on what, for them, are essential financial services. The report finds that substantial numbers of people rely wholly on cash and that access to bank branches is about not just the older generation but the younger generation, small and medium-sized enterprises and increasing numbers of self-employed people, who all have an important stake in the debate.
This year, the Access to Cash Review’s significant report found that 17% of Brits say that they would not cope without cash. As has been said, they are the most vulnerable people, such as the disabled, the poorest and the elderly, who are unlikely to be early adopters of contactless technology. Figures from the Financial Inclusion Commission suggest that they are also more likely to be among the approximately 700,000 people in the UK who want a bank account but, for various reasons, cannot open one.

There are significant regional, area-based and income-based disparities. More than 15% of people with an income under £10,000 rely completely on cash, in contrast with only 2.5% of those in the highest income bracket. People who have less access to cash are already subject to a poverty premium; they have been left behind by contactless and digital payment technologies and cannot shop around to get the best deals.

There are also difficulties for disabled people. Eleanor Southwood’s evidence to the Treasury Committee recounted how people who are blind or partially sighted can struggle to use a taxi driver’s touch screen PIN pad, and then often need to give away their PIN. It is important to think about the role of assistive technology in this space. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for assistive technology, I understand the potentially transformative impact of accessible technology and why it needs to be part of the debate about how financial services move forward.

The gaps in broadband provision, including in rural communities, can make access to cashless payments more difficult. Indeed, broadband notspots are not confined to rural areas; an estimated 1,000 households in my constituency do not have access to decent-speed broadband. Hounslow Council’s work to help to end notspots is a key part of the jigsaw, which will take years to deal with.

The question is how we are going to respond to the drivers of such changes, including new technologies, lifestyles and uneven economic progress, and the consequences of the increasing cost of our nation’s wholesale cash infrastructure, alongside the need for better financial education and financial inclusion. I thank the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) for being here and for his work on the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people.

I will say a few words about supporting the cash infrastructure. We know that The Telegraph reported last year that there were about 123 cash deserts—postcode areas that do not have a single ATM in their geographical coverage—and there are more than that now. A further 116 areas have just a single ATM, 36 of which are fee-paying ATMs. The Association of Convenience Stores also highlights how convenience retailers and ATMs enable financial inclusion, but they are also under threat from high business rates bills and cuts to interchange fees.

In addition, research by the University of Bristol on the distribution of ATMs in that city has found that the provision of cash is almost opposite to the geographical need for it. Lower-income communities are poorly served by current cash infrastructure. ATMs are changing from free to fee-charging, with deprived areas disproportionately hit. Of the 16 ATMs in Bristol that changed from free to fee-charging between October 2018 and March 2019, 11 were located in deprived areas.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically passionate speech. We have heard about the provision of cash machines in rural areas and in deprived areas, but does she agree that another consideration is the provision of cash in market towns? When the last bank closed in the small market town of Sowerby Bridge in my constituency, taking the cash machine with it, there was a detrimental impact on the market, and on its traders, who deal exclusively in cash. We really need to reflect on that problem as, I am sure, it is replicated all over the country.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I agree that this whole debate also needs to be part of a strategy for towns, which are often left out of how progress is made, how policy is implemented and who is the first to benefit when new resources are rolled out. The provision of financial services and ATMs is absolutely vital for ensuring economic progress and the viability of businesses.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The banks are closing down everywhere and are using the excuse that we can use post offices to access cash. Yesterday it was announced that 1,000 post offices are to go and more to follow. Sub-postmasters are not making the same money as the banks. That is now going to lead to a more cashless society. That, to me, is what the banks are heading for.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend’s extremely important point is one I was about to go on to. We have seen this debate previously in relation to post offices, and have then seen post offices become an important part of the strategy for maintaining access to cash—Mastercard and others are also working with them. Research from the Post Office shows that about 44% of small businesses believe that the convenience of cash is essential to their business, and also that they use post offices. Yet, alongside this debate, we see these warnings, and alongside the challenges that the post office network faces, deprived and rural communities will have even poorer access to cash.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the change in the post office contracts, particularly in the local and local plus contracts, meaning that post offices get only £12 for handling £1,000 of cash, is driving down the provision of post offices in rural communities and towns in particular?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Post offices in my constituency have raised similar concerns.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Should we also not look at what I see as the opportunities to improve the situation, including the opportunity to ensure more free cash machines supported by the banking system, which I hope the Treasury will take on? There is also an opportunity to require retail businesses to accept cash. The other day I walked into a Vodafone shop and they said that they did not accept cash—they had gone completely cashless. I thought, “What about vulnerable people? What can we do for vulnerable people?” Does the hon. Lady not agree that it is really important to do that as well, and to maximise the opportunity for the post office network to ensure that vulnerable people can still access cash and financial services in their often rural communities?
Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Indeed, he has made similar important contributions in his work on the Treasury Committee. He talks about the importance of cash needing to be part of the debate, and I know that other hon. Members will be speaking on that issue later. It is an important part of the jigsaw.

I want to make a few points about our policy response and about how we need to move forward. The report from the Access to Cash Review made five broad and important recommendations: to guarantee access to cash, to ensure that cash continues to be widely accepted, to create a more resilient wholesale cash infrastructure, to make digital payments an option for everyone and to ensure joined-up regulation of cash. Within that, there are important roles for national and local government, banks, regulators, FinTech, building societies, payment systems operators and others. I also want to mention credit unions and their role, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to this important issue, as we plan for the next decade and beyond.

There are 1.9 million members saving £2.4 billion in the UK’s 500 credit unions. Credit unions are financial co-operatives and are therefore member-owned and democratically run. They have huge potential to play much more of a role, but that will need support and Government leadership. The Treasury Committee recently raised concerns about credit unions either going bust or having to consolidate to survive, and there is an urgent need to consider how we better support them. I want to make a few suggestions about how we can support the expansion of the UK credit union sector. A response from the Minister today on that would be helpful, and perhaps we can continue the discussion after this debate, which is only an hour and a half long.

The first suggestion is to appoint a Minister for credit unions. Yes, but I hope that the Minister has a cross-cutting responsibility and is committed to placing credit unions at the centre of retail financial services to ensure more competition and choice in banking. The Minister will know that the Treasury is responsible for credit union legislation and that other Departments also have an important stake, especially the Department for Work and Pensions and the Cabinet Office. I hope he can discuss how, in his role, he will continue to join up that work across Government and where we might see faster progress.

The second suggestion is that all workers be given the right to save in a credit union directly from their pay. Some 39% of the population have no savings, and to counter that we believe that all employees should be given the right to save directly in a credit union, by payroll deduction and at no cost to them.

Thirdly, all schoolchildren ought to be given the right to join a credit union school savings club. Good savings habits for life should be encouraged at an early age. All policies in this area should reference credit unions as able to take such deposits, in the same way as banks and building societies can.

Fourthly, early changes should be introduced in the new legislative programme, to take the opportunity to build on the pre-election Treasury consultation on credit unions and dismantle obstacles that prevent the transformation of the UK credit union movement into a player with the significance of its international peers. Elsewhere, although there are market differences, credit unions are significant players: in Ireland 73% of the population are members of credit unions and in North America the figure is 43%.

I am pleased that, following the publication of the Access to Cash Review report, there were moves to respond to it very quickly. The Bank of England announced that it would convene relevant stakeholders to design a new system for distributing cash on the basis of the concerns that had been identified. The Treasury Committee took evidence and produced an important report on consumers’ access to financial services, which was published last week. The Treasury announced that it was commissioning a new joint authorities cash-strategy group, involving the Treasury itself, the Payment Systems Regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Bank of England. There will indeed be much work for the new body to do.

I would be grateful if in his response the Minister updated Members on strategy formulation, and how the work of the group will operate alongside the work being done by the Bank of England. There needs to be more joined-up working, rather than silos, overlap and duplication. I would also be grateful if he told us what progress he expects to be made by the autumn, when I understand the Access to Cash Review panel plans to meet and review its progress; which consumer bodies will be involved in the development of the strategy, particularly co-operative institutions; and how the group will respond to the individual recommendations made by the Access to Cash Review panel.

We face unique challenges in the modern world, and we need to make sure that both Parliament and the Government are responding to those challenges. Access to cash is not a problem that is unique to the United Kingdom, and neither is the need for robust legislation—as and when necessary—and regulation to ensure it. The Swedish legislature was recently forced to create a cross-party commission on access to cash, due to a public outcry after hospitals announced that they would no longer accept cash payments. Swedish bodies and representatives repeatedly told the Access to Cash Review that we needed to act now, as it is much harder to re-establish cash infrastructure than to preserve it.

Local authorities are an important part of this jigsaw and of our response. My local council in Hounslow, led by Steve Curran and Lily Bath, is taking steps towards financial inclusion, which is vital as local authorities are at the forefront of helping local citizens deal with a lot of changes. Those changes have come through welfare reforms, but also from the housing crisis that we face—a number of people are in temporary accommodation, and may have been waiting for a long time—and are affecting people’s access to services in many ways, as well as their resilience.

I am pleased that there are more innovations in communication and that better research into segmentation is under way, including understanding the financial capabilities of council tenants. A higher than expected number of those tenants do not have bank accounts into which payments can be made, whether welfare or other payments. That is why it is important that we all, including local authorities, revisit the idea of closer working with credit unions. Given the importance of this work, Parliament and Government must act to promote the role of local government in making sure that we preserve access to cash and financial services.
To conclude, joining up how we move forward together is increasingly important, because of the complex map of the stakeholders involved. We are not going to get multiple chances at this; change is going to take time, and it has to be done right. It has to be done with the right research, the right underpinning and the right policy frameworks, with confidence, and with the message that if all those involved in financial services who have a stake and a role, including banks and those involved in cash infrastructure, do not play their part effectively, there will be regulation and legislation. We also need considerable programmes for digital inclusion, and incentives to diversify services within the industry. We need to make sure that those services continue to reach the people who need them and that cash continues to be accepted.

I also hope that we can have a discussion about how this issue forms part of wider economic strategies, including industrial strategy. Labour has talked about regional banks providing an opportunity to ensure financial inclusion; there are examples from abroad that we can learn from, including the Sparkassen, and the Mann Deshi bank in India—I have been looking at whether we can do some reverse learning from that bank in my constituency. Mobile technology, which some of our financial services have already begun to use, has been vital in supporting women, particularly in rural areas—to set up their own businesses and manage their household finances.

I thank organisations such as City Pay it Forward that make an important contribution to increasing financial education in our schools; as I mentioned before, I consider that to be extremely important. Our new local charity, Hounslow’s Promise, is working to make sure that we have financial understanding and financial literacy, which are vital to ensuring that people can take advantage of new services that are on offer.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady for her knowledgeable, detailed and excellent speech. We are moving towards a cashless society far too fast, and often this is taking place in a small shop as well.

We need that continued access to be able to secure the future of our high streets. We need that continued access to be able to secure the future of our high streets. We are moving towards a cashless society far too fast, and often this is taking place in a small shop as well.

My final point, which I have made to the Minister several times, is that we must look towards banking hubs. We have to look at alternatives to ensure our consumers continue to have choice.

9.58 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this debate. I will echo one of her points, and then throw in two other issues.

First, credit unions represent a potential solution to financial exclusion, but they suffer from regulatory handicaps at the moment: they cannot offer a series of products that are clearly in demand, including car lending, insurance and credit card services, and they often cannot offer services to small businesses. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister what action the Government will take to sort out the problems in this area, which I know he is familiar with. Credit unions have been lobbying for some time for legislative changes, and to get a more sympathetic regulator. From what I can see, nobody on the FCA board has any credit union experience whatever. There was someone in the past, but there does not seem to be anyone with any awareness of credit unions, and that may explain why the FCA has interpreted the Credit Union Act 1979 in a particularly restrictive way to date.

We have to accept that there is a significant market failure in the provision of financial services, but we should also accept that the big banks still have a responsibility to help tackle the problem. They should be held to
account for who they are lending to and in which districts. In that sense, they should support a campaign that the Centre for Responsible Credit is particularly vociferous in. It demands that banks publish what they lend down to postcode level in an anonymous way. Through that, we could track the areas that are genuinely being supported by the bigger players in the financial services industry and the areas with a need for charitable activity or more support for credit unions.

Lastly, if someone is looking for financial services products in media and advertising terms, they are deluged with services offered by the big banks or the payday lenders. Credit unions and other charitable and not-for-profit lenders are not given anything like the same attention. There needs to be a significant effort by Government at all levels to promote alternative sources of lending, with a particular focus on credit unions.

10.1 am

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also the chair or vice-chair of various all-party parliamentary groups that are pertinent to this debate and discussion. I congratulate the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this debate on a hugely important issue that needs greater consideration than it has had in this place. The issue affects us all, as we have outlined already, and I am sure Members will continue to do so.

In my part of the world, our local newspaper the Derbshire Times reported only last week that the number of ATMs available in my constituency has reduced by 20% over the past couple of years, from 137 to 111. We have had the usual bank branch closures and changes.

We lost another branch in Dronfield just a few months ago. That was the Royal Bank of Scotland. We have lost our Lloyds branch in Clay Cross, and we continue to see reductions in ATMs and the like.

We have to deal with those challenges, however, rather than just moaning about them. There is a conundrum in front of us. People’s habits are changing, as is how people want to bank. The numbers of people going into bank branches and using cash are decreasing. Cash is now being used in three in 10 transactions—10 years ago, it was six in 10—and that number will reduce further. We have to find a way to balance the challenges that have been rightly articulated by Members this morning with recognising that we cannot and will not stop progress.

We also have to recognise that there is a cost to the provision of cash. That cost may not be obvious to consumers, but it is built into the infrastructure and the costs of financial services already. Essentially, we are dealing with a classic long-tail problem. We have early adopters. The majority of the market and a majority of consumers can deal with this issue and are happy to do so, but we rightly identify a group of vulnerable people and customers who we need to ensure are supported. Those consumers live in my constituency, as they do in everyone else’s.

In the brief time I have available, I will make a couple of points and a couple of suggestions for things to consider or where it might be useful for the debate to go next. We should be careful about explicit legislation, but I agree that there may be a case for it in certain places. We should celebrate, as the hon. Lady outlined, alternative forms of saving and lending, such as credit unions, which I am personally very supportive of. If there is an argument for legislating, it may be around equalising the premium in accessing cash and the poverty premium that goes on top for vulnerable people in accessing various things. We should foster competition and celebrate those institutions and building societies, such as Metro Bank, that are expanding their networks. We should also look at how we expand the number of bank accounts available for people.

10.4 am

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this debate. It might seem counter-intuitive to suggest that access to cash is vital for financial inclusion, because everyone says the future is in FinTech, but my local authority did a survey two years ago to see how many people in Wigan use the internet regularly, and it found that 30% have never even accessed the internet. That is below the national average. Many who do not access the internet are on lower than average incomes or are disabled or old. Some 93% of those over 80 have never used internet banking, and we need to think about those people when we promote digital by default. It does not have to be online and cashless.

Clearly those without internet access cannot bank online, but with the pace of bank closures, neither are they able to do it face to face. Not only are the physical branches going, but the ATMs are going, too. In Wigan, we lost one in nine cash machines in less than two years. Yes, that is the cashless society, but many prefer to use cash, particularly those on low incomes. If their income is tight, they need to be able to check every penny that passes through their hands, and cash is a tangible asset. People cannot go overdrawn with the money in their purse.

It is not just a few people who say it is important to have that access. A survey of more than 1,200 Which? members found four in five saying that access to the free-to-use network was important to their daily lives and for paying for goods and services. It found that removing free-to-use access would leave one in 10 struggling to make payments. We therefore have to question the closure of so many ATMs and bank branches. As the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) said, we also need to ensure that shops and businesses remain cash-friendly and customers are not forced into paying by card.

There are many issues with paying by card. People do not always trust online transactions, and I congratulate the TSB on its fraud repay scheme, which creates more trust in financial services. Access to banking and financial services is at the heart of the inclusion and exclusion debate. We need to be careful not to be drawn into saying that FinTech will be a universal panacea. It is vital that consumers have the freedom to pay for goods and services however they choose. If we sleepwalk into becoming a cashless society, it will have grave consequences for our most vulnerable people. I am not anti-technology; we need to encourage people to face the future and to embrace the advantages of technology, but we should
not run before we can walk. For the foreseeable future, cash and digital have to exist side by side and as complementary tools in increasing inclusion and improving people’s lives.

10.7 am

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for bringing this debate forward. I speak as chair of the APPG on credit unions and as a fellow member of the Financial Inclusion Commission. When I first came to this place two years ago, I visited a credit union just outside my constituency that serves several of my constituents. A lady there said something very important to me. She said, “Bim, it is very expensive to be poor.” I really thought about that, and everything I have seen in the past couple of years has confirmed my sense of the facts. We have already heard that 39% of people have no savings. When people have very little cash—or, should I say, money, resources, or assets—it can often cost them so much to do things and to borrow money. They can quickly fall beneath the waterline. That is one reason why credit unions are so important, and I echo the things that have already been said about promoting credit unions.

Financial education has not particularly come up in the debate. I lose track of the number of times that people have said over the past five, 10 or 15 years, “We need to promote financial education in schools. People need to learn better habits. They need to be able to manage their money more effectively. They need to understand how mortgages work, how credit cards work, what annual percentage rate is and what interest is”, yet we never do anything. Will the Minister respond to that in his remarks? I know he is not the Education Secretary—at least, not yet.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Does my hon. Friend know something?

Bim Afolami: I do not say that with any knowledge at all.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I am happy where I am.

Bim Afolami: That is good. I hope that the Minister will tell us what work he can do across Government to champion financial education, which we all agree needs to be improved significantly.

The Minister wrote to me on 20 February about things that the Government were doing to promote affordable lending and credit unions, and about the affordable credit challenge fund, a no-interest loan scheme. Those are all very good things, but I simply say to him: we want more. There is a need for legislative change to allow all types of credit to be provided by credit unions. If he pushed that through Government, he would be a hero not only on the Government’s side of the House but on the Opposition’s side as well.

The last thing I will say about the cashless society is this: I was on a trip to China a year or so ago and I was in a city called Wuhan, a long way away from Beijing, and I could not use cash. Things are moving very fast. I could not use cash. We need to enable people to adapt to the new society and not try to hold back the tide. The Government need to help people achieve that.

10.13 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry.

In my home town we have an excellent fish man called Steve who comes all the way from Buckie to flog his fish, and his smoked haddock is to die for. Steve is also a political sage. When he predicts that an MP will lose their seat, he is usually right, so I am very careful of him. Steve takes cash for his fish. You could no more present your mobile or your card to pay by contactless than fly to the moon. For many years, having ready cash in one’s purse, wallet or pocket has been fundamental to a civilised society. If we do not have it, we might as well go back, at least where I live, to bartering and swapping a salmon for a bag of peats or something like that.

With the best will in the world, we cannot go entirely digital or contactless in a constituency such as mine. As the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) has said, there are many areas where the iPhone and iPad simply do not work. In the case of my own Bank of Scotland card, it is already playing up, so it does not always get money out of a hole in the wall or work when I go contactless.

In my constituency we already have precious few ATMs. There has been talk of safeguarding them, but that is time limited. If a retail premises with a cash machine shuts, the shop goes, the cash machine goes, and no safeguard in the world can stop that happening.

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. His constituency is similar to mine. Does he agree that 24/7 access to cash is important in market towns? Certainly I note a postcode lottery developing in my area.

Jamie Stone: That is absolutely correct. I compliment the hon. Gentleman on his very good point.

There is a nasty parallel, as other Members have said, between the closure of ATMs and the closure of bank branches. In just a short time—can you believe this, Sir Henry?—we will have only one bank branch in the whole huge county of Sutherland, which is 2,028 square miles. Imagine what that means for my constituents. There are, however, already examples of banks working together to form one-stop shops in southern conurbations in England. I call on the Government and the Scottish banks to do something similar for rural areas such as mine in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

I must give due credit to the Minister. We had a constructive meeting care of the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) the other day. I believe that the Minister is on to the issue and is working well towards sorting it out, so I wish him Godspeed. If we do not get it right at Government or bank level, it will be a fundamental failure and we will be letting down the poorer, as other Members have pointed out, and the elderly, who absolutely rely on having 24/7 access to cash.
on an important issue. I agree with her point that there is widespread concern across the country about access to cash. It is hugely important to us all. We all need cash to varying degrees for incidental purchases, giving children money for school, paying the milkman and so on. Access to cash is often, though not always, easier in cities and towns, but our country is also made up of lots of smaller towns, villages and communities.

There are 2.2 million people in the UK almost entirely reliant on cash in their daily lives. We know that the use of cash is in decline, but, as we have already heard, the UK is not ready to become a cashless society, and sleepwalking into one will leave millions, including many people in my constituency, behind.

The communities that I represent in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are ranked in the Welsh index of multiple deprivation as some of the most deprived in the country. Deprivation is measured by a range of statistics, including health inequalities, educational attainment, income levels and access to services. In my constituency, some of the economically deprived areas are also geographically isolated communities, such as Bedlinog, Ponsticill, Fochriw, Butetown, Abertysswg, Pontlottyn, Phillipstown and Aberfan. Those communities have a strong community spirit and breathtaking views up or down the valley, but they are often isolated from services and support. The Access to Cash independent review established in July 2018 concluded that around 17% of the UK population would struggle to cope in a cashless society. I welcome the recommendations in the review to ensure that consumers can get cash wherever they live or work, and I look forward to the further work to consider the report’s findings.

In the south Wales valleys, as in many other parts of the country, we have seen banks closing, with a 38% reduction in the number of banks since 2010. In the Upper Rhymney Valley part of my constituency, the last bank closed in January. On the Merthyr Tydfil side, the only banks that remain are in the town centre, leaving huge parts of the county borough without access to bank facilities. There are ATMs throughout the area, but many impose a charge for residents to withdraw their cash. As an example, Aberfan has three ATMs that all require a fee to be charged, and Bedlinog has two machines that are both chargeable.

Along with my Welsh Assembly colleague, Dawn Bowden, I am currently working with the company LINK to identify communities that have little or no access to free-to-use cash machines. We hope that shop owners will convert to free-to-use machines. As we know, subsidies are available for cash machines located in deprived areas, with the first ATM to convert to free usage receiving the subsidy.

Geographically isolated communities often experience issues with digital inclusion because the broadband is not as strong as it is in other areas. The report and the attention that it has received is welcome. However, it must be part of an ongoing awareness campaign to ensure that we move at a pace that does not leave communities behind.

10.16 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing the debate. In my constituency we are fighting two bank branch closures: Santander at Parkhead Forge, and, just recently and most unhelpfully, the Clydesdale Bank, which has announced that it plans to shut the Shettleston Road branch. The Government and the banks would say that the post office network can provide support, but there is a flaw in that argument when we look at the Tollcross post office in my constituency, which has had a temporary closure for two years now. I leave that point with the Minister. We are due to meet tomorrow to discuss it a bit further.

One thing that has most angered me has been that Santander and the Clydesdale Bank both proposed to remove the ATMs as well. Santander had the absolute barefaced cheek to contact me to say, “This is a very well-used ATM machine. Can you help us find someone else to take it on?”, which is laughable. However, ATMs are hugely important to a local economy, and any moves to remove them from the high street or to add charges to them has an impact on people from low-income areas such as my own. In Cranhill and Sandyhills we already see ATMs that now have a charge, which we are taking up with the ATM providers.

Some Members have already touched on the issue of credit unions. Before I entered politics I worked in a credit union, and only last month I chaired the summit of a lot of Glasgow’s credit unions. It is no secret that in Glasgow we have had two credit unions go bust recently: most recently, Parkhead Credit Union. It is all well and good for us in this place to talk about the importance of credit unions, and I would absolutely encourage people to join a credit union. I should at this juncture declare an interest as a shareholder in Cranhill and Balillian credit unions. There are, as I am sure the Minister knows, issues relating to capital ratios and the governance of credit unions. More often than not when I visit my local credit unions, most of the members of the board are well over retirement age, so if we are talking about the sustainability of credit unions, we need to look at that as well.

The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) touched on the important issue of financial education. He is absolutely right to point out that it is an issue we have spoken about for a long time. If I reflect on my own experiences, it was when I was 16 that I started to really understand budgeting and the importance of financial education. I very much commend Christians Against Poverty, which does really good work supporting people with budgeting. If we are serious about ensuring that young folk make informed decisions about their finances, we need to teach them about such things as APR the importance of ethical lending. One way of doing that is through credit unions.

What discussions has the Minister had with Education Ministers across the UK to ensure that we put pressure on Governments across these islands to invest in financial education?

This has been a good debate, and there is clearly an appetite for lots more debate. I hope that the Minister will take the points raised on board.

10.19 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on facilitating it.

The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) touched on the important issue of financial education. He is absolutely right to point out that it is an issue we have spoken about for a long time. If I reflect on my own experiences, it was when I was 16 that I started to really understand budgeting and the importance of financial education. I very much commend Christians Against Poverty, which does really good work supporting people with budgeting. If we are serious about ensuring that young folk make informed decisions about their finances, we need to teach them about such things as APR the importance of ethical lending. One way of doing that is through credit unions.

What discussions has the Minister had with Education Ministers across the UK to ensure that we put pressure on Governments across these islands to invest in financial education?

This has been a good debate, and there is clearly an appetite for lots more debate. I hope that the Minister will take the points raised on board.
The banking situation has changed substantially over the past 20 years. Indeed, some of the traditional banks would say that the playing field is unfair as it stands. New incomers do not have the fixed asset responsibility of our traditional banks, yet they pick up none of the responsibility for the financial exclusion towards which we are seemingly heading. Work is needed to ensure that all those that benefit as new emergent banks are responsible for the traditional side of banking, which forms such an important part of our communities, particularly our high streets.

Scotland has suffered more bank closures than many areas. Over the last eight years, the number of branches has fallen from 1,625 to 1,015. Indeed, more than 400 have closed since just 2015. In East Lothian, virtually all our towns—Tranent, Prestonpans, Gullane, North Berwick and Dunbar—have suffered bank closures and changes to ATMs and branch opening hours.

We have heard about many important things, including credit unions and education, which has thankfully opened the space for the use of hubs, to which the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) referred. The Royal Bank of Scotland, Lloyds and Barclays have started business hubs in England. Companies that have large amounts of cash to deposit and want to transact business can go into such hubs and deal with them, irrespective of which bank is theirs.

Similarly, in Edinburgh and Glasgow an entrepreneurs’ hub has been formed, orientated towards new businesses. That model will work on our high streets. The challenge for banks is that, in essence, two separate software systems are operated. However, that can surely be overcome. The advantage of a hub, shared by branches, is that when someone goes in they are dealing with their bank. The challenge facing post offices is that often the employees on the other side of the counter, employed by the Post Office, do not have the banking experience or knowledge to deal with sometimes significant problems, and it is basically unfair to expect it of them.

Through legislation and Government and local authority work, the facilitation of hubs would allow people to continue to deal with their bank. The asset cost would be shared, and it would keep footfall on our high streets so that there is cash for our markets and for people who want to deal in it. Problems will be solved, and hopefully banking on our high streets will have a future.

10.22 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Fethlam and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on introducing the debate and setting the scene. Building a relationship with staff enables trust to be built, and with that comes a better working relationship. Although I am obviously of an older generation, I understand that it is a lot simpler for my staff to log on to online banking on their lunch and pay their credit card bill than to spend their entire lunch in the queue at the bank. That leads to better working relationships between employer and employees.

Notably, the bank is still busy: it is not failing or empty. There are always queues in my local branch, because its presence is necessary. There is a need for the ease that online provides, but there is an equal need for a bank on the high street to service people. That is the argument for retaining cash in our society. Technology is great for those who do not want to use cash, but not so great for those who cannot use that technology, as hon. Members have mentioned.

An estimated 17% of the UK population—more than 8 million adults—would struggle to cope in a cashless society. A decade ago, six out of 10 transactions were cash; now it is three in 10. On a number of occasions in my constituency there has been a glitch in the car parking payment system. Such glitches mean that issues with a 30p payment can lead to a £45 fine in the post that is impossible to query, as other payments are supposedly logged as successful. There is a fear among an older generation that if they cannot see or touch something, they cannot really have it.

I have also heard from several shop workers who have had to chase customers after their card payment did not go through due to connection errors. Those are things that happen every day, and are real issues with cashless options. They show that we are nowhere close to being able to do away with money. People want it all. For me, that does not mean that we should do away with cash; we should embrace all payment methods. I hear the banks crowing about how online banking is thriving, but sometimes signs tell us that we cannot lift money in a bank unless the cash machine is broken, or that there is a charge for paying a bill in the bank that can be paid for free online. Many such things annoy people, pushing them away from frontline banking and cash.

Hailing from a mixed urban and rural constituency, I fear that we are leaving behind too many isolated people, who cannot rely on technology and an internet connection. Some 60 bank branches and 250 ATMs across the UK close per month. The Countryside Alliance has suggested that the regulator take action to stop further closures of ATMs, that an access to banking protocol be introduced so that when a branch moves, customers are made aware of the banking services at the nearest post office, and that the Post Office and banks standardise the banking services over the post office counter.

The move towards a cashless society risks creating vulnerable customers and exacerbating financial exclusion among those who cannot access those services. We have a duty to ensure that both forms of payment and transaction are available. If that means Government intervention, I believe that that is what we must do.

10.26 am

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): This is not a minor issue, particularly in constituencies such as mine with a large rural area and market towns. The LINK Access to Cash Review found that cash is an economic necessity for 25 million people, and that 8 million adults—17%—would struggle to cope in a cashless society. In my constituency, as in others that have been mentioned, banks, post offices and ATMs have closed, making it more difficult not just for ordinary people to go about their everyday lives and make transactions, but for market traders, those wishing to hold community events, and charities—[Interruption.] I hope that we can all recover from that cry for attention from the alarm system.

I was speaking about the problems faced by market traders and charities in holding events, fundraising and bring communities together. Such events rely on cash to make them happen. It is already becoming much harder,
with insurance premiums and regulations governing them. That means that people are less and less able to hold such events to bring people together. A lack of cash also means that people in rural areas who need it feel that they have to take out larger sums when they travel to a town. That makes them more vulnerable to crime and to people seeking to prey on them. The Government have to be mindful of that.

Post offices are expected to pick up the pieces of access to cash, as well as the lack of banks. As I mentioned, post office contracts are extremely important. Sub-postmasters across my constituency on all different types of contract tell me that they are struggling, but particularly those on the local and the local plus contract. However, it is not possible to scrutinise those contracts and how the changes have affected the profitability of post offices. I urge the Minister to speak urgently to colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about that much-needed review.

Convenience stores must not be left to carry the load. As chair of the all-party parliamentary small shops group, that is certainly close to my heart. At the moment, 62% of convenience stores provide ATMs, almost three quarters of which are free to use. Interchange fees have been reduced twice already, resulting in cuts worth more than £1,000, split between the operator and the retailer. In spite of the delay in next year’s cut, ATMs operators serving 73% of free-to-use ATMs not hosted by banks are now implementing or considering a decision to switch to pay-to-use machines. They are also penalised by business rates; I call on the Minister to look strongly at the fact that average ATM rates add £4,000 a year to the bills of a small retailer. That seems punitive, certainly for free-to-use ATMs at a time when we need to encourage them.

LINK says that we need “a clear government policy on cash...market forces alone won’t make any of this happen.”

Besides looking for a joined-up policy on cash in rural areas, towns and hard-to-reach areas, I encourage the Minister to look at the review of the interchange fee and at enabling banking in all areas, reviewing post office contracts and profitability, and exempting free-to-use ATMs from business rates. If he wants some practical methods to look at, I hope that he will give him a start.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Thank you for being so brief. I call Paul Sweeney.

10.30 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) to two minutes at the end of the debate for the hon. Member for Rotherham (Gavin Newlands) (SNP): I raised that very point in the main Chamber just a few weeks ago. Ferguslie Park is the most deprived community in Scotland, yet it has two ATMs, which charge 95p and £1. That goes to show that LINK’s financial inclusion programme is not worth the paper that it is written on. I am still awaiting a reply from LINK after a month. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that its inclusion programme needs to be improved?

Mr Sweeney: I completely agree. My constituency, like the hon. Gentleman’s, has had a disproportionate number of closures. I commend and thank the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), and the hon. Gentleman for their work on the issue. The LINK cut is critical, but we need legislative backing to safeguard provision. Many small businesses, including postmasters, are saying that they will not pay punitive business rates to maintain free cash access.

The discussions about credit unions are pertinent, and I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and my hon. Friend Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for speaking about their work on the issue. As a result of the closure of the Greater Milton and Possilpark credit union, 4,212 members have had that facility taken away. Santander is threatening to close and remove its ATM, just as in Parkhead. This is a critical issue, because banks do not feel any sort of obligation to maintain their provision. In America, Santander has a £1.9 billion community reinvestment obligation to maintain their provision. In America, Santander has a £1.9 billion community reinvestment fund because the American Government have forced it to do that in poorer communities, but there is no equivalent legislative obligation in the UK.

We need legislative teeth to back up the provision of banking services in our poorest communities. I urge the Minister to recognise that urgent need in our communities, particularly in Glasgow North East.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): We want to leave two minutes at the end of the debate for the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) to wind up, so if the Front-Bench spokespersons confine themselves to eight minutes each, I would be very grateful.

10.33 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this important debate. As we have heard today, there are serious concerns that too many people, including some of the most vulnerable, are being left behind.

Every one of us needs a viable way of paying for goods and services that meets our needs and circumstances. For some people that may be card payments, but we
need access to cash for goods and services if that is most appropriate to the way we live our lives and if it suits our circumstances. Digital payments have become easier, but research shows that more than 8 million adults would struggle to cope in a cashless society.

It is important to remember that many people pay for goods and services in cash because their circumstances mean that they do not have the option to pay in any other way. The biggest factor in paying for goods and services in cash is where someone is on the income scale: the lower someone is down the scale, the more likely they are to rely on cash transactions, regardless of their age. Importantly, approximately 9% of those who rely on cash transactions do so as a budgeting strategy because they fear that if they do not use cash, they may overspend and fall into debt. Using cash helps them to keep track of their spending.

There is no doubt that cash allows many people a degree of control that digital transactions do not offer, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). They can hold it and count it—and when it is gone, it is gone. It is a real and physical aid to budgeting. Indeed, debt advice charities actively encourage people in debt to cut up their cards and deal only in cash, for obvious reasons. That goes back to the points that have been made about financial education.

We have heard much about the decline of ATMs, but that is merely the tip of a significant iceberg—it is a symptom of a wider trend. The underlying issue is that some businesses prefer payments to be made digitally, because of the costs of handling and banking cash; we heard today that Vodafone no longer accepts cash payments at all. We have also heard much about access to high street banks. In my constituency, North Ayrshire and Arran, the banks are stampeding out of our towns with alarming and eye-watering speed. In the past eight years, Scotland has lost one third of its banks, and closures continue apace, as the hon. Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) described.

Driving consumers towards digital payments clearly excludes those consumers who do not want—or simply do not have the option—to pay for goods digitally. If we want businesses to continue to accept cash, we have to make it easier for them to do so, and to bank and deposit it in a way that works for them. Post offices have been suggested as an alternative to banks, but post offices are in crisis. Many postmasters are finding their business increasingly unsustainable, and they often work for less than minimum wage—an issue that I raised with the Treasury and with Post Office Ltd almost two years ago.

For those who need to use cash, we must keep it viable. It is important to remember that 1.3 million people in the UK do not even have a bank account, for a whole variety of reasons. Problems with ATM access are both a cause and a symptom of a society that is moving closer to being cashless. That should give us cause for real concern.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I am worried about time, so if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will press on.

Consumer organisation Which? has found that cashpoints disappeared at a rate of 488 per month between June and December last year, with more than 250 free-to-use cash year since closing, monthly and 3,300 UK bank branches closing their doors since 2015. One in five cash machines in Scotland will impose charges by the end of this year. It is self-evident that charges for using ATMs hit those who are much less affluent much harder, because those people are more likely to make regular smaller withdrawals rather than occasional larger ones. Quite contrarily, pay-to-use cash machines are most often found in poorer areas—yet another poverty premium that punishes the less well-off.

It is clear that we need urgent regulatory action to protect the right of consumers to use cash. Otherwise, as the Minister will know, we will exclude many of our constituents from buying goods and services that they wish to access. I therefore fully support the Which? campaign “Freedom to pay, Our Way,” which is supported by the Federation of Small Businesses. The campaign calls on the Government to appoint a regulator with sole responsibility for cash infrastructure, to ensure that consumers and businesses can continue to access cash.

It should not be an uphill struggle for people to access the cash on which they rely, because it means that they struggle to go about their daily business.

The drift towards digital has not been without its problems, including IT glitches such as the high-profile problems suffered last year by TSB, which caused chaos for consumers. As the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston reminded us, aside from IT glitches, people living in rural areas can find digital access extremely problematic, with poor broadband reliability. Of the 5.3 million adults who never use the internet, 70%—some 3.7 million people—live in rural areas. They do not rely on cards and digital payments. We must not overlook the challenges of relying on digital payments for consumers and businesses in rural areas, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

It is essential that consumer interests are front and centre in this debate—the customer must be king. The way we bank and the way we pay for our goods and services must meet the needs of all customers, and banks and financial institutions must have a legal duty of care for their customers.

I hope the Minister will indicate the Government’s willingness to appoint a regulator with sole responsibility for the cash infrastructure, to ensure consumers and businesses can continue to access cash. I hope to hear what he will do to ensure a duty of care in all our communities so that they are not financially excluded and can access the goods and services that they need. It is clear from this debate that there is a financial exclusion crisis. I am sure we are all keen to hear what measures the Government will take and are willing to take to address the matter.

10.41 am

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Sir Henry, for giving me the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this debate on such an important issue. It is good to see such a significant turnout of colleagues. There has been a fair degree of consensus in what has been said.
As shadow City Minister, I spend a great deal of time thinking about how financial services can be changed to improve financial inclusion and how we can remove the poverty premium that we know exists in the UK and that so many Members have referenced. For me, it is impossible to build a fair society—the kind of society we all want—without guaranteeing a degree of access to basic financial services. It always confounds me that we are one of the most advanced global financial centres in the world, yet there are 1.6 million adults in the UK who remain unbanked, and thousands more who are denied access to the basic levels of credit that many of us take for granted.

When I look to the future, I see the challenge as making sure that we can use new technology to tackle financial inclusion, rather than compound the problem. Some new financial technology companies are doing brilliant work to break down historical barriers in banking, such as providing easier access to bank accounts or using rental payment data to help build up credit scores, but technology risks leaving people behind if we do not protect and equip them along the way. That has been evident in the trends surrounding the use of cash.

As many Members have said in the debate today, our use of cash as a nation is declining. According to figures from the British Retail Consortium, cash accounted for just 22% of retail transactions in 2017, which is an inevitable consequence of the rise in popularity of contactless and mobile payments, but there is a significant danger of sleepwalking into a cashless society without giving careful thought to what that will really mean.

Some communities, especially vulnerable ones, are still reliant on cash and their ongoing access to cash must be protected. I unreservedly commit the Opposition to that position.

Some poorer families and individuals need cash to budget effectively, a point that was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). There is no solution that compares with cash for people who are reliant on, for example, a carer to carry out tasks for them—it is quick and easy to see how much change there is when a carer has done the shopping for someone—and, of course, for the unbanked, cash is a lifeline without which participation in society would simply be impossible. It is up to us to carefully consider access to cash and to create a system that protects more vulnerable individuals.

Natalie Ceeney’s Access to Cash report, which was commissioned by Link and has been referenced quite a lot in the debate, outlined the situation we face and made some sound recommendations for consideration. The Chair of the Treasury Committee noted at the time that “leaving the future of cash to be determined by market forces will not work.” The Opposition certainly agree with that.

Establishing cash as a utility will be central to protecting consumer access. I have heard quite a lot of support for that in my initial conversations with the big UK banks, with ideas such as how they could share cash-centre facilities—the sort of back-office function that underpins much of the cash system.

Bank branch closures form a critical part of this debate. In the Opposition’s view, the reduction of the bank branch estate has been too severe. Under a Labour Government, there would be mandatory consultation on bank branch closures, given the negative impact they have on communities, which many Members have referenced. I am mindful that we have held quite a few Westminster Hall debates on this topic recently, and Members will have heard our views then, so I want to focus on the ATM estate.

We know that the number of ATMs has dropped significantly. There are complex factors at work that we must be mindful of. We should focus on protecting ATMs in communities that would end up being stranded long distances from free access to cash if they were to close. LINK’s offer to pay a subsidy on those machines of up to £2.75 is an important step towards preventing cash deserts from emerging.

In other places, especially city centres, we will ultimately see that there is an excess of cash machines. It is inevitable that there will be closures in areas of high concentration. For example, I am planning to go home today and when I get to Manchester Piccadilly station, there are at least six free-access cash machines on the station. I think that will probably decline over time.

I add a word of caution. We must be alert as politicians and regulators not to be seen as being there to protect the incumbents from the consumer change that we have seen. We can protect access to cash at the same time as recognising changing consumer habits.

We must also be open-minded about creative solutions that will help to safeguard choices for everyone in how we pay. Lloyds Banking Group, for example, has launched a pilot scheme to incentivise cashback by paying retailers a small fee per transaction. We will have to see the results to ascertain whether it is effective, but at face value it seems like an interesting addition to the provision of cash. Cash can be expensive for shops to process and handle securely, yet keeping a small cash float that can be passed on to consumers would help address that problem. It means they can still accept some cash from customers who want to use it, and it would encourage visits to the high street. The point about business rates raised by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) must also be addressed. There will not be one panacea that regulators can impose to solve access to cash. The solution will lie in deploying a mix of such co-operative tools that see banks and shops working together.

The Opposition urged the Treasury to open an urgent review into access to cash when Natalie Ceeney’s report was published. I am pleased that those calls have been heeded with the establishment of the Joint Authorities Cash Strategy Group, which must act quickly to ensure that the future of cash can be safeguarded. I am particularly keen for local communities to be given the right to demand a review of access to cash in their areas, which the regulator will then have to respond to if necessary. For our part, the Opposition are ready to support any effort that moves us towards treating cash as the essential utility it is, guaranteeing access to it for all and protecting cash for those who really need it.

10.48 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this important
debate. I commend her for encouraging us to consider the issue across multiple areas, because it is in understanding how things fit together that we will find some of the solutions that the 15 speeches that I have carefully listened to in this morning’s debate have drawn attention to.

To improve financial inclusion, we need to be firing on all cylinders, bringing together regulators, civil society and industry—from the big banks to credit unions—to ensure we create a financial services landscape that offers something for every consumer. I am keen to engage with the points made. I will have further conversations, including with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) tomorrow; I have attended the all-party parliamentary group of the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and met a number of other colleagues, who are here today, on specific matters. I will try to attend to all the points in my response.

It is undeniable that the retail financial landscape is changing, as more consumers and businesses opt for the convenience, security and speed of digital payments and digital banking. At the end of 2017, debit cards overtook cash for the first time as the most frequently used payment method in the UK. It is also true that increasing digitalisation and technological innovation are changing not just the way we pay for things, but every part of our society—from communications to shopping, and from transport to healthcare. It is an exciting but disruptive time. I acknowledge that it is a confusing time for some of our constituents, as they struggle to keep pace with the rate of change.

The Government recognise that there is a need for cash and traditional face-to-face methods of banking. Although financial firms take operational resilience very seriously—indeed, last Monday I visited Barclays Joint Operations Centre to see how the bank is keeping its customers safe from cyber-attacks—we cannot guarantee that IT systems will never fail. Cash is therefore a crucial back-up system that many people continue to rely on.

We have heard that cash remains some people’s preferred, or only, method of payment for a variety of reasons. I am sensitive to that, and it is important that the Government act. We have expressed our commitment to safeguarding access to cash for people who need it. As the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston acknowledged, we have set up the Joint Authorities Cash Strategy Group, which brings together the Bank of England, the Payment Systems Regulator and the Financial Conduct Authority, to provide comprehensive oversight of the UK’s cash infrastructure, from supply to customer access. The announcement was made a couple of weeks ago, and the group’s work will complement the Bank of England’s work to reform the wholesale cash industry, so that it encourages innovation and guarantees resilience, even in a lower cash usage environment. As cash is used less, we need to refine the way it is distributed, because the existing method is too expensive and needs to be improved.

Industry has a central role to play in maintaining access to cash, because with industry innovation we can do more at a lower cost. As the Access to Cash Review shows, innovative industry initiatives are already being developed. In conjunction with PayPoint, Link is exploring a new service that offers cash and balance inquires through PayPoint’s convenience store terminals. In response to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), I make the following observation on an initiative by Square, a digital payments company that recently did a trial in Holywell to help small, independent retailers take card payments. It found that 55% of shoppers in Wales would be more likely to shop locally if businesses took cards, which has led to more than 95% of the town’s independent shops now taking cards. It works both ways, and FinTech provides new opportunities.

The shadow Economic Secretary mentioned the important initiative by Lloyds, in partnership with Visa. I note his reference to the Post Office, which provides for cash withdrawals and cash and cheque deposits at each of its 11,500 branches across the UK. Indeed, a sub-postmaster in Devon, whom I met last year, recently contacted me again to say that banking transactions would be more likely to shop locally if businesses took cards, which has led to more than 95% of the town’s independent shops now taking cards. It works both ways, and FinTech provides new opportunities.

I am sensitive to the points raised by the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston and for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on credit unions. I want to update the Chamber on that matter, which I take very seriously. There are 440 credit unions across the United Kingdom, and it is a question of distilling exactly what they want to happen. When I spoke to a number of CEOs of credit unions at the Association of British Credit Unions Limited conference on 9 March, it was clear that they have initiated a national call for evidence and will come back in September with a clear ask of Government about what legislative action needs to take place. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East helpfully pointed out, there are credit unions that have a whole range of experiences. It is not a question of the Government’s mandating them to be set up, because that would not work. We have initiated a pilot for prize-linked savings, and I hope that will actually increase the use of credit unions. I note the suggestions about getting schoolchildren involved in the use of credit unions, and I am open to looking at how that could be advanced.

Mr Sweeney: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: This is the only time I will, because I have to make progress.

Mr Sweeney: I spoke to John Lyons, who runs the Carnbyte and Riddrie Credit Union. He made it clear that the reason the Greater Milton and Possilpark Credit Union failed my constituents was that credit unions were previously allowed to share resources between each other. Owing to punitive restrictions on regulations, that is no longer the case, which is why individual credit unions are more vulnerable to failure.

John Glen: I am always sympathetic and listen carefully to credit union chief executives and their experiences. I have been in the Treasury for 16 months, and rarely does a week pass without my receiving notification of a credit union that could be in difficulty. If we are to loosen the regulatory reform and enable more transactions and more functions of credit unions, we need to ensure that we have the governance in place, so that people do not fall foul of credit unions that go the wrong way. It is a complex area. I am not trying to be patronising, but it is important that we get a joined-up policy solution that pays attention to the sector’s requests.
Although maintaining access to physical banking and cash is important, there is another, equally important side to this story: ensuring that the benefits of new technology are felt by all, and that everyone has the ability to participate. For people who need to keep tight control of their money, and for those who cannot afford to lose a penny, the ability to check their bank balance on the go, or to freeze a card instantly, is critical. We know that too many people are currently excluded from such benefits.

Recognising that the advantages of digitalisation should be felt by all, the Government’s digital strategy commits to enabling people in every part of society to access the opportunities of the internet. We have established the digital skills partnership to bring together the public, private and third sectors to address the digital skills gap in a more co-ordinated and collaborative way. From 2020 we will introduce an entitlement for adults who lack basic digital skills to undertake fully funded basic digital skills training. This new entitlement will mirror existing entitlements for adult literacy and numeracy training.

I want to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). The new Money and Pensions Service will simplify the current public financial guidance landscape and offer a more holistic approach to financial education. I am talking to representatives of UK finance and the voluntary sector to look at how we can get a more co-ordinated approach to financial education, which is always raised in these debates.

The Government recognise that access to the internet depends on being able to connect to it, and we are making progress with this problem. Superfast broadband, providing downloads of at least 24 megabits per second, is now available to 96% of UK homes. Hon. Members will have seen that last Sunday we launched the Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme, a £200 million investment that will enable communities that have not previously benefited from broadband to leapfrog to the most advanced fibre technology. I hope that will be a solution for colleagues who represent the most rural constituencies.

I will conclude, in order to give the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston an opportunity to respond. We all agree that vulnerable customers must not be left behind as digitalisation changes the way we bank and pay for things. Of course, part of that is about ensuring that physical banking and cash remain available to people who need it—the Government, regulators and industry are already taking action to ensure this. However, it is equally important that we redouble our efforts to ensure that all our constituents benefit from new technology. We cannot reverse digital innovation and nor should we, given the benefits it brings to our constituents.

I want to end with a call to arms to industry to think about all consumers—not only when it is considering the future of cash and physical banking, but when it designs new digital products and brings new innovations to the market. I will keep pushing industry to achieve this, and I hope hon. Members will join me in doing so.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their remarks. I also thank the Minister for recognising that this is a confusing time, that the rate of change is faster than we had predicted, and that cash is required. He made a very important point on cash being a back-up if a system of technology fails. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, including the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), who helped me pitch this subject to the Backbench Business Committee.

We absolutely cannot sleepwalk into a cashless society. Equally, we cannot turn the clock back on progress. However, the market is failing and we need to intervene. We also need to ensure that it continues to be affordable to accept cash, requiring joined-up action to reduce the cost, reform our cash infrastructure and ensure efficiency and resilience. Where needed, we must also incentivise joint industry working in the design of consumer services and products that are based on need. If that requires further supply-side reforms to enable hubs and provide more opportunities to work together, we need to grasp that challenge—both in terms of policy and of shifting our culture. I recognise some of the interesting ideas coming from Mastercard and Visa—including jam-jarring to help with savings, and support for credit union infrastructure—but there needs to be so much more.

I thank Natalie Ceeney and her panel for their work on the Access to Cash Review. Government action is welcome, but it cannot be on a slow burn—for example, the no-interest loan scheme pilot, which was announced last year, has not yet progressed. We need to continue working together on this issue, and I look forward to doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial exclusion and the future of access to cash.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their patience and restraint in restricting their speeches to the limit. This has been an excellent debate.
Secondary School Standards: East Cleveland

11 am

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered secondary school education standards in East Cleveland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I was prompted to seek this debate by recent Ofsted reports about two of the large secondary schools in East Cleveland in my constituency—Freebrough Academy in Brotton and Laurence Jackson School in Guisborough. Both were rated “inadequate” in every measure of their assessments, and that is rightly a source of huge concern for pupils, parents and teachers alike. The report on Freebrough, in particular, was damning beyond words. Pupil progress was rated “very poor”, and there had been a dramatic decline from the high standards set under the previous head, Linda Halbert. Even more seriously, leaders are unsure where pupils are for extended periods of time, and instances of bullying are not rare.

When I visited the school earlier this year, I was genuinely shocked. It was the week when the Northern Education Trust had come in to take over the management of the school, with a new headteacher, Mr Michael Robson, poised to take charge the following Monday. The scenes were like a caricature from “Grange Hill”, with gangs of pupils wandering the school during lesson time, flaunting their total lack of respect not just for teachers but for the whole concept of learning. The team from the NET has been working very hard to turn that around, and I am looking forward to visiting Freebrough again this Friday to see what progress has been made.

The situation at Laurence Jackson is not in the same league, although that is clearly a low bar. Ofsted explicitly recognised that the appointment of Mrs Jackes as headteacher last September had started the process of improvement, although at the time of the inspection in February insufficient progress had been made for anything other than an “inadequate” rating to be issued. Thankfully, the school has commissioned external advice on how best to deliver services such as special educational needs funding and the pupil premium. I hope that that will make a real difference to the quality of the offer that it makes to children in Guisborough, although things will clearly need to be kept under close review.

Both schools shine a light on the systemic challenge that we face in the north-east of England, and in the borough of Redcar and Cleveland in particular—namely, the gulf in performance between primary and secondary education outcomes. We also need to talk about why that occurs and move beyond the superficial debate that sometimes characterises this issue. In 2018, pupils in the north-east ranked second only to London for the percentage of pupils reaching the expected key stage 2 standards in reading, writing and maths. That is to say that we rank second of the nine regions of England. The think tank IPPR North specifically singled out the high performance of Redcar and Cleveland in its 2016 report “Northern schools”, highlighting how it excels at primary education and achieves results outstripping most London boroughs, which are widely regarded as the benchmark for high performance. However, by the end of key stage 4, the north-east ranks ninth out of the nine regions: we are bottom of the pile when it comes to the average Progress 8 and Attainment 8 schools. Pupils in London achieve an average of a fifth of a grade more than the average for pupils with similar starting points, but those in the north-east achieve an average of over a fifth of a grade less. Only 57% of secondary schools in the north-east are rated “good” or “outstanding”, compared with the national average of 75%.

In last December’s Ofsted annual report, fully 10% of secondary schools in the north-east were classified as “stuck”, compared with just 3% in the south-east and 2% in London. In 2015, Sir Michael Wilshaw spoke of a divided nation beyond the age of 11. That is a concept that really worries me and my constituents, and speaks volumes about the way in which social justice issues need to be addressed in this country. What makes this particularly painful is that we know it does not have to be this way. Across our country as a whole, 2 million more children are now going to schools rated “good” or “outstanding”, compared with when the Conservatives came to office nine years ago. Only 4% of schools are rated “inadequate” today, but someone who lives in East Cleveland now has about a 50% chance of going to an “inadequate” secondary school. That, of course, directly affects life chances.

The proportion of 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training stood at 15.2% across the north-east at the end of 2018—by a distance the worst statistic of any English region. When it comes to the proportion of 18-year-olds starting higher education, in 2018 the north-east had the second lowest rate at just over 29%. By contrast, in London the figure is 42%. To fix this, we need nothing less than a moral crusade not to allow the north-east to continue to spin away from the rest of the country in that fashion, like a probe receding ever further into space. The point is that behind every one of these statistics lies a child, like my own three-year-old—a young person for whom opportunities are being slammed shut almost before they become aware of them, and for whom adult life is that bit less likely to deliver the fulfillment, both economic and emotional, that it is our duty to help promote to the utmost of our ability. I know that the Minister cares very deeply about that, but we simply have to do better.

I meet my local headteachers every term to talk about their issues and concerns, and I always come away inspired by the men and women I meet, by their determination not to make excuses, and to offer blood, sweat and tears to do the right thing and deliver the best education they possibly can. The same spirit drives the great majority of the teachers they lead. I promised them that I would bring their concerns directly to Westminster and give them a voice, which brings me to the central theme I want to address today. If we are to turn this around, we need to think much less about geography and how the north-east compares with other regions, and more about the socioeconomic profile of the young people who live in the north-east. We need to end the situation whereby demography equals destiny. If my local headteachers were here, they would rightly say that we simply cannot ignore the impact of deprivation, both material and in terms of aspiration, on the challenges facing our local schools.
Redcar and Cleveland is a place where great natural beauty and pockets of affluence mingle with the grittiness of one of England’s last great centres of heavy industry. Communities like Skinningrove, Carlin How, Loftus and Liverton Mines typify the rural and coastal communities that have attracted a lot of analysis and attention from the Government and think tanks in recent years. They are places where life can be really hard. Although my constituency shares much of the geography and appearance of neighbouring North Yorkshire, which is a stone’s throw away, the reality is quite different and at times the gulf feels much more than just a couple of miles. As Professor Becky Allen has shown, if we factor in measurements of contextual value added, which truly take pupil demographics into account, we can draw a very different picture of the relative success of north-east schools.

Accounting for that deprivation is not to accept what President George W Bush memorably called “the soft bigotry of low expectations”.

Like me, local school leaders reject that utterly for their pupils. People from Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland are no less talented than young people from elsewhere, and should settle for no less. One of the greatest challenges of life in the north-east more generally is ensuring that we have confidence in our region and our strengths and are willing to go toe to toe with other areas. The confidence of the wider region was shaken severely during the 1980s. With the decline of much traditional heavy industry, we lost a lot of our sense of place and purpose in the world. That has had lasting and complex consequences. In focusing on these issues in the context of education, the real problem is not that secondary schools in my region are worse as a group than those elsewhere but that they face particularly serious challenges in terms of the profile of the pupils they educate.

Research by Mike Treadaway for Education Datalab, which I will share with the Minister after the debate, finds that the impact of disadvantage varies according to the number of times that a pupil has been entitled to free school meals throughout their time in school. More specifically, the attainment gap of pupils who have been eligible for free school meals just once in six years is about half that of pupils who have been eligible on every occasion. Regions with lots of entrenched multigenerational disadvantage, such as Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, therefore face a particular challenge.

What does that mean for policy? First, we have to deliver a fair school funding system, which is a matter of broad agreement, and was a Conservative manifesto commitment in 2017. The north-east is not penalised as grotesquely as some parts of the country by the broken system built up over the last several decades, but I simply cannot explain or justify the scale of funding disparity between different parts of our country.

I know that establishing an objective and empirical formula is fiendishly complex, but we now have to wait until 2021 for a rational formula to be brought into full operation. I urge the Minister to ensure that her Department accepts no further delays to the roll-out of fair funding, and to go in to bat for a more generous school funding settlement in the comprehensive spending review.

Secondly, and more importantly, we need to look at how that education funding can be distributed to best effect, and I will talk about the pupil premium. Mike Treadaway, who I mentioned a moment ago, has highlighted how additional funding received by schools is the same for every pupil premium child. When he wrote his analysis in September 2017, the pupil premium was £1,320 each year for primary schools and £935 for secondary schools. Surely, there is a strong case for differentiating the funding according to the percentage of time that each pupil has been eligible for free school meals, or, in other words, to focus the most resources on the most deprived, even within the pupil premium funding envelope. Treadaway has shown that that could be implemented in a way that would result in an overall funding change no larger than 5% for each region of England. That would benefit areas such as the north-east, the north-west and the west midlands, where poverty is the most densely clustered.

Thirdly—to move beyond funding—we need to align incentives properly to attract the best teaching talent and leadership to our region. Will the Minister set out how she thinks we can best address the vicious circle whereby poor Ofsted reports, such as those for Freebrough Academy and Laurence Jackson School, can make it harder to attract and retain good teachers and school leaders in the schools where they are most obviously needed?

We must have such hard-edged accountability, which is one of the reasons why I totally reject Labour’s new policy of abolishing SATs, but equally, we must ensure that the system supports teaching professionals who are brave enough to get stuck in where they are most needed. Frankly, we do not need the most inspirational people in strong schools. We need them to bring their talents to bear in the north-east of England. Whether we attract them through salary incentives, professional status, the honours system, or anything else, we must be more creative. How does the Minister think we can achieve that?

Beyond funding, my fourth priority is to adopt policies to tackle the catastrophic decline in the self-esteem and motivation of white working-class children over recent decades. That goes back to my earlier point about the lasting impact of de-industrialisation on my region. Children from other ethnic backgrounds perform far better than their white peers. Astonishingly, that happens almost regardless of whether those minority pupils are rich or poor. We must not hide away from that. My constituency is made up of about 98% white people and the predominant number of them are working-class.

Anyone who watched last year’s BBC documentary “The Mighty Redcar” will have seen what a brilliant, amusing and inspiring set of young people we have locally, some of whom, I have no doubt, will set the world on fire with their achievements in the years to come. What is the Government’s plan to engage those young people as a cohort, and to challenge the all too prevalent culture that often sets little store by academic attainment, or, at its worst, sometimes takes a perverse pride in shunning it altogether?

In particular, can we target budgets for pedagogical research into how best to reach young people from really deprived backgrounds? Can we tackle questions such as how best to teach an 11-year-old boy who comes from a home where he has never had a discipline structure? That leads to the awkward point where schools find themselves playing the role of parent or social worker, and large amounts of time and resources—both emotional and financial—have to be devoted to looking
[Mr Simon Clarke]

after those children. It is simply not the case that those schools inherit intakes of pupils who are all ready and well equipped to succeed at the point of entry. Consideration of how to tackle that systematically and fairly needs the closest possible engagement by Government and civil society.

I look forward to meeting the inspirational Loftus martial arts group in the next few weeks. They are a really good example of how the voluntary sector can play its part in establishing boundaries, purpose, teamwork, and all the values that are needed to succeed in life. It is important that Government play a role, too. Highlighting the problem is not to downplay what is already being achieved but to recognise that, across the north-east, we have to do more and do it better.

I would not want my speech to suggest that there are no hugely positive things under way in East Cleveland. There are schools that show just what can be achieved in our area, such as Outwood Academy Bydales in Marske, which was rated “outstanding” last year, or Nunthorpe Academy in Middlesbrough and Huntcliff School in Saltburn, which were both rated “good”.

I was genuinely delighted in particular by the £24 million announced by the Government last October for the Opportunity North East initiative, which has a specific focus on closing the gap between primary and secondary outcomes. We know that we can do it at primary level and that what we are doing works, so we need to ensure that the right lessons are learned about how to extend that culture into secondary level.

Opportunity North East came about in part because the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), joined me in Guisborough last spring to meet local headteachers at Prior Pursglove College. He heard directly from teaching professionals in our area about the challenges that they face, their concerns and the priorities for putting things right. As part of the package comes a very welcome £12 million, to provide more support for newly qualified teachers in the north-east. I really hope that the programme, which seems to target precisely the right issues, will make a huge difference.

With that in mind, will the reports from the executive board of Opportunity North East be made publicly available, so that we can provide scrutiny, support and challenge? If successful, will the programme be maintained so that its core elements endure beyond the initial three years that are earmarked for funding? If it is to achieve lasting good, Opportunity North East must not be simply a flash in the pan, but must be part of a new and higher baseline of long-term support. I believe that raising education standards in the north-east, and in my constituency specifically, is a generational challenge.

I pay huge tribute to Tees Valley Careers, the £3 million initiative announced last year by the excellent Mayor of the Tees Valley, Ben Houchen. It is an excellent programme of careers and enterprise education, which tackles all the Gatsby benchmarks for a really inspirational and effective set of principles. The headline feature is that every young person in the Tees Valley, during their seven years in education between ages 11 to 18, will have seven meaningful employer engagement encounters, both internal and external to the learning environment. Every academic year, they will also attend at least one externally organised fair or workshop that highlights the skills needed for the workforce. That is exactly what we need. It speaks to the wider mission beyond our education system, namely, to ensure that our young people can go on to thrive in the world of employment and that they are not just educated but employable, and have the right skills, modelled for the local labour market, to ensure that their aspirations are achievable.

Last Friday, I visited Easterside Academy in Middlesbrough, in my constituency. We witnessed personal, social, health and economic education lessons for a year 6 group, who played the Game of Actual Life. It was a really thought-provoking session, which was brought in externally by expert Simon Carson, who is also a constituent of mine. It tried to focus young people growing up in one of the tougher parts of an industrial town such as Middlesbrough on what they want to do with their lives and how they can achieve that. Such programmes demonstrate exactly what we need to do. When I asked the boys, many—too many, frankly—said that they would be footballers. I absolutely hope that many go on to achieve those dreams, but we also need to ensure that that realistic, understandable and equally exciting opportunities are open to them.

Measures such as that should give my constituents real hope that things will get better. As we create thousands of jobs on Teesside over the next few years, the next generation of Teessiders will be well equipped to take them. That outcome lies at the heart of my plan for my constituency, and at the very heart of my wider political philosophy. People across Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland do not want to settle for second best; they do not want to be at the bottom of league tables; and they do not want their children to be written off. All branches of Government in the north-east and here in Whitehall need to support my local secondary schools to become “good” or “outstanding”. For as long as I have the honour to represent my home constituency, that is a cause I will continue to champion until we achieve it.

11.20 am

[The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under you this morning, Sir Henry.]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing this debate. I was struck by the account of his visit to Freebrough Academy, and he mentioned Laurence Jackson School. He also mentioned bullying, which is a worry and often goes hand in hand with poor discipline and poor educational outcomes in a school that is generally not succeeding in its primary responsibility, which is to get its children to a state where they can learn with sufficient discipline in the class. My hon. Friend broadened the debate to encompass the wider inequalities of which the north-east is a victim. He is right about the moral imperative—demography should not have an impact on young people’s destiny. I say frequently that it should never matter where people are born, who their parents are, who they live with or who they know; everyone should have a chance to get on in life.

We want to—we have to—change the fortunes of those living in my hon. Friend’s region. As he said, confidence is critical, and in focusing on educational outcomes it can be a difficult balance to recognise
where they are poor while also building the confidence of the area. I am sure that he will have danced around that difficult issue: it is right to call out a school when it is performing badly, but the impact of doing so on the wider community can be devastating. He emphasised the poor Ofsted report, and the problem with that is that the school then might not attract the pupils it needs, despite the successful efforts of new leadership teams. School reputations are won and lost with devastating effects, while turnaround can be slow and difficult to achieve.

My hon. Friend mentioned the visit of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, who is proud of what he is starting in the north-east. As my hon. Friend said, Opportunity North East is an investment programme of £24 million over three years, which will deliver a widely shared ambition across the north-east to achieve rapid—’rapid’ is important—and sustainable improvement in outcomes for young people. The ONE programme is overseen by Lord Agnew. He will focus on five clear cross-cutting challenges: raising attainment and outcomes for pupils at the end of secondary and post-16 education; recruiting and retaining great teachers for north-east schools; because another problem with a school getting a poor Ofsted report is that the teachers go elsewhere; increasing progression of pupils to university, including top institutions; and supporting young people to secure great jobs.

My hon. Friend asked if the report would be made public. I am afraid that I do not have the answer to that, but I strongly suggest that he meets Lord Agnew, because he will be impressed with his approach to such issues—Lord Agnew is a man in a hurry, and will not rest until he sees things turn around.

A key priority for the ONE programme, which I do not think my hon. Friend mentioned, is to unlock the potential of secondary schools in the region. Through the ONE Vision programme, a key part of Opportunity North East, 30 secondary schools across 11 local authorities will be partnered with high-performing school leaders and given bespoke support to raise standards. The ambition is to support those 30 schools to move towards at least an Ofsted “good” rating to improve outcomes, and to help schools sustain that improvement—sustainability matters.

The ONE Vision programme will benefit up to 25,000 young people and help them to learn the skills and knowledge to unlock their potential. I am pleased to report a total of 12 ONE Vision schools in the Tees valley, with five in Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland. Both Freebrough Academy and Laurence Jackson receive ONE Vision support. Schools have already begun to receive an analysis of need across governance, finance, teaching and learning, and leadership—leadership is so important in schools.

Officials have consulted extensively with Redcar and Cleveland Council and Middlesbrough Football Club on their programmes to help local children from those communities thrive in their transition from primary to secondary education because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland rightly pointed out, there is a stark difference—let us hope that does not result in more people wanting to be footballers, because not all of them can be. We intend to commission activities to test robustly the impact of the most promising approaches to improving that transition. My hon. Friend is probably aware of a number of other regional programmes, but I will not go into detail. Again, I thank him for his contribution to the debate and for raising so well the issues that affect his constituents.

I remember standing in this Chamber, probably eight years ago, as a Minister with responsibility for public health. We had a debate on health inequalities in the north-east, and I cited some of the figures that demonstrate the appalling health inequalities in the north-east, but I was slated in the press for doing so. I think that the quote was something like, “Public Health Minister says that everyone in the north-east smokes too much, has too much sex,” and whatever. That is a difficult tension: first, we have to recognise the problem, to face up to it and to tell the truth; but at the same time, secondly, we have to put confidence into the community, and the support it needs to change the outcomes for young people.

I also have ministerial responsibility for further education, and FE colleges do a fantastic job. Those young people who have not done well at school—for whatever reason, whether disorganised and chaotic backgrounds, a lack of discipline in the schools or any of a variety of reasons—have low aspiration and often minimal social capital. FE colleges pick those kids up and give them their second, third, fourth or fifth chance. I am pleased about that with the apprenticeship programme in particular, but a similar move has been made by many more employers, who no longer focus on qualifications but on young people’s skills. They might not have done well at school, but that is not to say that they do not have real skills that, when developed in the workplace, can mean a good career and a successful future. I hope that all such programmes will have an impact.

As I said, I urge my hon. Friend to look at the correlation between poor health outcomes and educational attainment. I think that he will see that close correlation, which does not stop at what qualifications people get and the job they get; it leads into later life. We need to do a great deal, but the Secretary of State is fully behind ensuring that we make a difference to my hon. Friend’s constituents. I thank him for raising this important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
**Intimidation in Public Life**

[SIR GARY STREETER in the Chair]

2.30 pm

**Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered intimidation in public life.

I start by declaring an interest as a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which has expressed some views on this topic, to which I will refer. On 12 July 2017 I brought this subject to the House’s attention. At that stage, most of us had just returned from what we thought was an especially toxic and divisive general election campaign, in which abuse, intimidation and criminal damage appeared to be commonplace. In that debate, colleagues gave numerous examples of their experiences during that election campaign; no doubt, we will hear a few more today. At the time, we said that they were not just examples of the rough and tumble of a lively general election campaign, which we should encourage and welcome. Death threats, rape threats, misogyny, antisemitism, racism, homophobia and criminal damage all featured somewhere in colleagues’ recollections after the 2017 campaign.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In addition to events during the election, my constituency office was very recently vandalised with graffiti, stickers and threatening messages. That was concerning for me because the office is meant to be a secure place that my constituents can visit. We must ensure that staff work in a safe, abuse-free environment. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wholly unacceptable in a democracy for some people to resort to violence, aggression, intimidation and vandalising the property of democratically elected officials?

**Simon Hart**: I am sure that the Minister will have some thoughts on that, but from my point of view, the answer must be yes. It is worth reminding anyone who might think that such a course of action has some purpose, it is generally self-defeating. If we learn anything at all from such events it is how it stiffens our resolve to make sure that democracy is not damaged as a consequence of the thuggery that we have come to see as a fairly regular feature of our lives.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend. He is right to refer to the 2017 election. I spoke in the last debate about what happened in that election; my staff were spat at, and there were threats and damage to property. Perhaps the most sinister thing was damage to the properties of my constituents who simply put up a poster in their gardens and windows in support of me as a candidate. It is their democratic right to do that, but their properties were damaged, attacked and vandalised for daring to express their democratic will. That is not acceptable in a democracy. It happens to all parties—let us not pretend that it happens only to one party—so we must all work together to ensure that people are free to express who it is they wish to support in an election, without thinking that their garden, windows or property will be damaged.

**Simon Hart**: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I will come back to it in a little more detail in a minute. I restate the point I made: in the end, such action is self-defeating, although it might not feel like that at the time.

The accusation quite frequently levelled at us is that, really, we deserve everything that we get as MPs and we are quite thick-skinned so we need to grow a pair.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman sincerely for bringing this important debate. A lot of the abuse goes under the radar. I was slightly hesitant even to stand up and talk in the debate, because it will bring a new torrent of abuse. Somebody left swastikas at my offices on a number of occasions, and no action was taken, despite the person responsible being found. On occasions, I have received more than 500 abusive messages a week. It is important that we are not scared to come forward and talk about what is happening.

**Simon Hart**: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I have been told by colleagues only in the last few days that they do not want to draw attention to their plight in this debate for exactly those reasons. At home I have a shed full of election boards with swastikas and various other semi-artistic contributions that people put on them. The hon. Lady and I may be able to stomach that kind of thing, but it is about the effect on our staff, families, volunteers and voters.

When MPs are accused of being thin-skinned, it sometimes strikes me that Parliament would be a terrible place if it consisted only of the thick-skinned, because with thick skin comes occasionally the temptation to dismiss or be somehow unsympathetic to the causes that are brought to our attention. I commend thin-skinned Members of Parliament. Although none of us will ever admit to being thin-skinned, there should be no harm in privately admitting it to ourselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) said, it undermines the fundamentals of democracy that people who want simply to exercise their democratic right in public by expressing a voting preference, making a donation that might appear on a register or engaging in some other quite modest and discreet way, should not be allowed to do so free from prejudice and discrimination. If nothing else, we owe it not to Members of Parliament but to all those who make the democratic wheels turn to make them feel that they can do so free of that risk.

Going back to 2017 when we last debated this issue, everybody in the room, including the Minister, agreed that something must done. The Minister commented:

“The Government are determined that no candidate—regardless of their party, background, race, ethnicity or sexuality—should be forced to tolerate abuse, online or offline, whether it is physical abuse or the threat of violence or intimidation. It is utterly unacceptable in our modern democracy, which we believe is an inclusive and tolerant one, for the incidents of abuse discussed today to be allowed to go on unchallenged.”—[Official Report, 12 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 168WH.]

That was in July 2017. Are we in a kinder and gentler place than we were then? Is politics a more refined profession? There will be many views on that. We may expect another electoral event coming down the tracks some time in the next few months or years. There could
be another referendum, God forbid. There could be another general election. We may have thought that 2017 was bad, but unless we do something by the next wave of electoral events, this time it could be really bad.

The Government will no doubt explain their position, and they have made a lot of progress, but not much has changed since 2017. If things do not change by the next opportunity that people have to engage in a campaign of one sort or another, we will have only ourselves to blame. The reason for that is simple. In the past 12 months alone, reports of threats of this nature have doubled. The head of UK counter-terrorism policing said that 152 crimes had been reported by MPs between January and April this year. That is a 90% increase on the same period last year. The number of offences reported by MPs in 2018 increased by 126% on the previous year.

Despite the best of intentions by us all and the Government and other agencies in 2017, the facts speak for themselves: we are in a worse position than when all this last bubbled to the surface. In the last year we have seen Members pilloried as Nazis as they make their way to Millbank for media commitments, and journalists subjected to precisely the same abuse, to the extent that police officers, who both said there should be CCTV. However, I asked for guidance from the police and counter-terrorism authorities to tackle intimidation, for fear, ironically, of retribution. There are numerous ways in which we can approach this problem, and proper security is one of them. However, I regret that constituency offices, from which people could previously come and go freely without fear of consequence, have been converted almost into high street banks in terms of the security around them, making us more inaccessible and remote than we have ever been, at a time when the opposite should be the case.

**Simon Hart:** The hon. Gentleman makes an unarguable point. It is tragic that those fundamental beliefs are in jeopardy and that so few people in society are prepared to tackle intimidation, for fear, ironically, of retribution. There are numerous ways in which we can approach this problem, and proper security is one of them. However, I regret that constituency offices, from which people could previously come and go freely without fear of consequence, have been converted almost into high street banks in terms of the security around them, making us more inaccessible and remote than we have ever been, at a time when the opposite should be the case.

**Chris Bryant:** The point is not that any of us is intimidated by this behaviour. None of us is going to shy away from our full beliefs just because somebody paints something on a door or shouts something at us in the street or says something stupid on Facebook. We simply want to ensure that our staff and families are safe—and, for that matter, that constituents who come to see us are safe in the exercise of their democratic rights.

**Simon Hart:** As I said, this behaviour strengthens people’s resolve as much as anything. On the hon. Gentleman’s earlier point, the accusation that is bandied around that people are traitors is the most ridiculous and absurd accusation that can be made. Whether people like it or not, democracy is being played out, in a rather old-fashioned and very visible way, in exactly the place it should be played out.

**Ms Harriet Harman** (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward for debate, and I acknowledge his consistent work on it over the years. I think we all agree fully with what he says, the propositions he puts forward and the context in which he places them. This is not just criminality against individuals; even more importantly than that, it is a fundamental attack on our democracy.

**Ms Harriet Harman**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way. Given that my experience is very recent, hon. Members will forgive me if I am not entirely accurate about the current rules. Last year, there was an attempted break-in at my office, and I asked the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority whether it would cover CCTV. It refused to do so. When the same office was vandalised with threatening messages, I asked for guidance from the police and counter-terrorism officers, who both said there should be CCTV. However, IPSA continues to refuse to cover it. What does my hon. Friend think about that?

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I apologise for arriving a little late, Sir Gary; there is a debate in the main Chamber relating to similar areas of interest.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I agree with the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) about CCTV. My offices were attacked this weekend, with “traitor” painted all over them. That word is a common feature of the debate at the moment. Does the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) agree that there are no traitors in this House? Every single Member of Parliament is a full patriot; we just disagree about where that patriotism takes us. Being able to disagree openly, honestly and fairly, and to exercise freedom of speech, is the fundamental aspect of being a Member of Parliament in a free democracy. If that means that the House authorities have to step in to ensure that there is CCTV on Members’ offices, where our staff are often far more vulnerable than we are, that is what they should do.

**Simon Hart:** The hon. Gentleman makes an unarguable point. It is tragic that those fundamental beliefs are in jeopardy and that so few people in society are prepared to tackle intimidation, for fear, ironically, of retribution. There are numerous ways in which we can approach this problem, and proper security is one of them. However, I regret that constituency offices, from which people could previously come and go freely without fear of consequence, have been converted almost into high street banks in terms of the security around them, making us more inaccessible and remote than we have ever been, at a time when the opposite should be the case.

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**Ms Harriet Harman**: I think the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward for debate, and I acknowledge his consistent work on it over the years. I think we all agree fully with what he says, the propositions he puts forward and the context in which he places them. This is not just criminality against individuals; even more importantly than that, it is a fundamental attack on our democracy.

How does the hon. Gentleman think we should address this issue? Obviously, there are actions the Government need to take, and we know they are concerned, but in a way the issue is wider than that. It is an issue for all the parties and for the House as a whole, not just for the Government. What does he think about the mechanisms for taking action? One of the things I have considered—I do not know whether he thinks this is a good idea or whether he has an alternative proposal—is that we should have a Speaker’s conference on this issue. That would need the Government’s support. It would bring together the CPS, the police, the political parties—

**Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** Order. Interventions should be brief.
Ms Harman: Sorry, Sir Gary. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that might be a way to go beyond discussion and take action?

Simon Hart: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for her intervention; I hope she is given a chance to finish off her comments. If she will forgive me, I will come to some of the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and how those might go some way towards finding solutions.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

John Howell (Henley) (Con) rose—

Simon Hart: I am going to press on for two seconds and address the question of the Deputy Speaker’s role in this respect, which is relevant to the interventions of both the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Some of this clearly has a cost implication. IPSA has not necessarily been overly helpful with that over the years, although arguably its job is to scrutinise these things with great care. Any colleague who read the Deputy Speaker’s comments should be perturbed by the fact that, for probably the first time in living memory for everybody here, a Deputy Speaker was obliged to take that action at all. He has made it very clear that this issue is as much about the welfare and wellbeing of staff and volunteers as it is about us.

Vicky Ford: I want to raise the international picture. Last year, the Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted a study of the impact of the abuse of women parliamentarians in 45 European countries. It found that more than eight out of 10 women have suffered psychological violence, and nearly half have been threatened with death, rape or beatings. There is serious evidence that that puts women off standing for Parliament, thus directly impacting our democracy. Does he agree that this is an area in which the UK needs to lead the rest of the world? This is a problem not only for our democracy but for democracies across the world.

Simon Hart: I agree, as does the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which would go a bit further and mention the negative impact on diversity as a whole, in this Parliament and others. That point is well made, and it has been acknowledged by relevant Committees here. We will hear from the Minister in due course whether that will translate into immediate action.

In the last few days alone, one person has been jailed for life for making a death threat against one of our colleagues, and the hon. Member for Rhondda and nearly half have been threatened with death, rape or beatings. There is serious evidence that that puts women off standing for Parliament, thus directly impacting our democracy. Does he agree that this is an area in which the UK needs to lead the rest of the world? This is a problem not only for our democracy but for democracies across the world.

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In the last few days alone, one person has been jailed for life for making a death threat against one of our colleagues, and the hon. Member for Rhondda and numerous others have had their own experiences. A number of other cases are currently live and therefore sub judice, so we probably should not mention them. There are quite a lot of ongoing incidents at various stages of the legal process. Only yesterday, somebody of the name of Ruth Townsley, who is unknown to me, casually tweeted about the recent incident involving Nigel Farage that she would “prefer acid but milkshakes will do for now”.

I am not here as an apologist for Nigel Farage, but he is as entitled as anybody to be out on the campaign trail. Although he may easily be able to deal with milkshake attacks, it must be the height of irresponsibility, if not criminal, for people casually to take to social media and bandy around such suggestions as if they were some kind of joke.

Andrew Percy: The person who attacked Nigel Farage yesterday tweeted last week that the Prime Minister was a “stupid little witch”. Again, that demonstrates the abuse that women in politics in particular are subjected to.

Simon Hart: This matter has been looked at by a number of parliamentary Committees. I mentioned the Committee on Standards in Public Life. It has also been looked at by the Select Committee on Home Affairs. The Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has looked at it, but mainly in the context of online abuse, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights has touched on it in various capacities.

With the next wave of electoral events possibly heading our way, what can be done? In answer to the question from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, there are the party codes, which started slowly and have proceeded at a reasonably gentle pace. Perhaps this is the time to put our foot on the accelerator a bit. Whether those codes are joint or individual, whether they are visibly enforceable and whether they involve parties not currently represented in Westminster are matters that may be resolved in the coming days or weeks. However, the idea that the political parties are free from responsibility is unsustainable. Parties have a responsibility to deal with their members and supporters robustly and visibly, sending a positive message to others who may be tempted to go down that route.

I am therefore pleased it was announced today that the Jo Cox Foundation will work with the Committee on Standards in Public Life and political parties to draw up a common statement of principle on intimidatory behaviour to encourage cross-party consensus to recognise and address this issue. That is the first point. Secondly, the Committee’s recommendations should be adopted as quickly as possible, including the three actions outlined in the recent “Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information” report. The first is to develop a new electoral offence of intimidation of candidates and campaigners, which is already a crime.

Paula Sherriff: I agree that it is important that we reflect on the internal processes we have in this place to deal with such abuse, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to see a much more consistent approach from our police forces, the CPS and other justice agencies? I have spoken to many colleagues and it appears that currently the police response in particular is disparate and patchy.

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady is right. That is on my list of actions. I should say that we have probably all witnessed closer engagement and greater recognition of the dangers of such activity from the police and the CPS. My police force has been faultless in its attention to detail as far as I am concerned, and I know that the Met has been doing its best as a central co-ordinator. However, the reality is that, particularly in the most intense, short election campaign, some of the issues in 2017 that might have had an impact on the outcome for individual colleagues were not addressed in that four or
five-week period. It was too complicated, they were crimes that rarely come up and police officers did not necessarily have an immediate knowledge of them.

I had one case in the 2015 election where electoral offences were being committed. I went to the police and was told that it had to be referred to the serious crime unit in York. I asked how long that would take and was told, “It will take six weeks.” I said, “That’s not a lot of use to me, because there is an election in two,” so they said, “Okay, we will book him for a traffic offence, then. That should sort it out.” I think that is what the police did. The hon. Lady makes a good point, and rapid action is vital.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I am ever mindful that when we in Northern Ireland take on the job of an MP, we take on the transparency of that job in meeting the general public and what comes with that. Many of us in Northern Ireland, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and me, have had direct threats on our lives because of the stand we take politically on issues, but—this is always at the back of my mind—public life does not mean signing up your spouses or children to be intimidated or bullied or threatened or murdered, whatever the case may be. Does the hon. Gentleman feel we need to raise the level to zero tolerance? Privacy for our families is important.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman has more experience in this field than most, and I agree with him. We are ultimately attempting to avoid a situation where the gene pool from which our political representatives is drawn gets smaller and smaller. Whether that is for local authorities, a devolved Parliament or this Parliament, if we do not address this intimidation soon, for the reasons he points out, we will attract fewer and fewer people, and arguably the standard we expect of our politicians will go down and down, and the frustration of our electorate will go up and up. We therefore must deal with it now. It is not one for the slow burner, because whether we like it or not we could face a very angry electorate within months. I mentioned the Jo Cox Foundation, and I do not need to remind the House why it was created. We do not want to find ourselves in a position that gets anywhere close to the reason why that was set up.

The Government are taking a welcome step in the form of the “Online Harms” White Paper. I do not want to get into the detail of the relevance of that; we are all aware of it, and there is a huge responsibility on social media companies to play their part in ensuring that democratic engagement can continue without people feeling they are driven off social media or off the political stage altogether. The White Paper is a welcome step forward, and we hope it will be converted into legislation sooner rather than later. I heard a rumour— it must have been inaccurate—the other day that part of the reason we have not moved faster is down to insufficient parliamentary time. I do not know whether hon. Members agree, but I think we could possibly squeeze it in somewhere over the next few weeks.

We simply cannot allow this thuggish behaviour to intimidate the democratic rights of our voters, and we cannot allow the culture of fear to deter good people from stepping on to any political stage, whatever it might be. I leave the last words to the chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Lord Evans, who is the former head of the security services and therefore some expert on the corrosive impact of such behaviour on democracy. He said:

“If the decisions MPs make start to be altered as a result of threats and intimidation, that amounts to subversion of the democratic system and would be a dark day for our country.”

I agree with him implicitly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, four speakers from the Back Benches are catching my eye and we have about half an hour before the winding-up speeches begin.

2.57 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. Some of the testimony we have heard from the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), whom I congratulate on bringing the debate to Westminster Hall, and others, has been truly shocking. I applaud colleagues who have stood up to this behaviour for their bravery.

The issue I wish to raise is not at all comparable, but it is pervasive and insidious: the bullying, harassment and intimidation of women MPs, often from within their own parties. It feeds into a culture of contempt for women that we see online and in other areas of our lives. At best, a blind eye is often turned to it. At worst, they are accused of provoking it, somehow, by being there. I have put up with this for my 22 years in Parliament and have never spoken about it until now. My mind has been changed by seeing some of my younger sisters going through the same thing. If someone like me, who has been here for a long time, does not call it out, who will? If not now, when?

Our problem is not in Parliament—I have had sterling support from both male and female colleagues over the years—but while we have changed the culture of this place and brought in more women, particularly in 1997 with that landmark election of 101 women MPs, we did not sufficiently tackle the culture in our own parties, where there are still people who believe that women do not belong in the public sphere and, if they are to be there at all, they are there to do as they are told.

That is the problem; I have seen it since I was selected. There were people in my constituency who did not want a woman MP. They considered the seat the rightful property of some favoured son. I have never come across afavoured daughter, by the way; it is always favoured sons. It started immediately. A man I had never met went on “Election Call” to denounce me. Untrue stories were fed to the press and I was labelled a militant, which at least gave my union colleagues a laugh because their nickname for me was “the hammer of the Trots”. I was accused of gaining the seat by some carefully unspecified chicanery, despite the fact I won on the first ballot and the count was supervised by the regional director of the party. One semi-literate bully even said that he was thinking of taking legal action;
I responded that legal action cannot be taken simply because someone has more votes than their favoured candidate.

**Ms Harman:** And more brains.

**Helen Jones:** However, what did my party do? It invited these people in and recounted the ballot in front of them. You do not treat bullies in that way; if you keep paying the Danegeld, the Danes keep coming back.

After I was elected, I found that council officers had been given an instruction not to bother too much responding to my letters, because I would be a one-term-only candidate. That instruction could have come from only the leader or deputy leader of the council. Even worse, the officers accepted it, rather than saying it was an improper instruction, which it was. I found that my next-door neighbour was frequently invited to council events in my constituency, but I was not. Each time they apologised, and said it was a terrible mistake, but they kept doing it.

I discovered that there was a little clique in Warrington of the self-appointed great and good, who decided most things between them—usually with little reference to the people I represented—and if they were challenged, they would react. I started doing mobile surgeries and found that people had been told not to contact me about their problem, because I was not any good. Through the years, I realised that there were more untrue stories leaked to the press—printed without checking, as in most local newspapers—from our friend, the senior source. A “wanted: dead or alive” poster with my picture on it was put through my door and I received a number of pretty vile anonymous letters, which were sent to me and to senior Ministers in the Government.

When I was shadow Minister with responsibility for local government finance, a particularly vile poison-pen letter was sent to leaders of local authorities. I am grateful for the support I received at the time from my colleagues in the shadow local government team. A similar thing was sent to anyone who had the temerity to come and do a fundraiser in my constituency.

By themselves, these events may seem slight; it is their cumulative effect that is the problem. They are not unique. If we are honest, there seems to be a problem with some male councillors who are used to being big fish in a little pond, and do not like having a woman MP. I know of several council leaders who deal with the male MPs in their borough, but not the woman. I know of one council leader who would not speak to a female MP in his borough, even if he were sitting in the station waiting room with her; waiting to go down to London.

In fact, I had a council leader who would not speak to me. Once, when I dragged him to a meeting, he sat in his chair tapping on the arm and refusing to engage. I know of one colleague who was shouted at because she dared to suggest that the local MPs might convene a meeting on a particular local issue; apparently that was a threat to a councillor. I know of one woman who has been bullied almost beyond endurance by the men in her constituency; she has been shouted down at meetings, her campaigning has been sabotaged, and a group would not contribute funds to her general election campaign.

I know of instances where MPs’ relatives have been sacked by the council, under some spurious pretext. Each time one MP meets a certain councillor she is asked, “How’s your auntie?” because he sacked her. I know of another MP who held a mobile surgery in a place where there had been very little work done in the past, only to have the councillor for the area ring up and say to her staff, without preamble, “Tell that effing bitch to keep out of my ward.” Was anything done to him? No; no action was taken against him at all.

I have an ex-parliamentary candidate in my area—not in my constituency—called Nick Bent. He is the outwardly respectable chief executive officer of a charity called the Tutor Trust and a trustee of the Oasis Academy. He has sent me so many abusive texts and emails that I have a thick file of them. Among his little gems—there are a lot—were calling me “poisonous and useless” and “not fit to tie my bootlaces”, not that I would want to. He usually says that I am going to be deselected:

“You should step down and make way. There are plenty of good candidates. After the election you will almost certainly be deselected, so it might be the only way to preserve a bit of dignity. Just some friendly advice.”

It does not seem very friendly to me, I have to say. This man has not only abused me: he has abused my staff, my family and my constituency chair, who is well-respected in the area and has done a lot locally. Women councillors in his constituency have been on the receiving end of abusive emails and messages from him. He reduced a young woman organiser to tears during a general election. In 2016, I submitted a bullying and harassment complaint; I had been pretty patient for six years. What happened? It was mysteriously lost. I resubmitted it, but I am still waiting.

Last week, I learned that a whole cache of emails and letters, which are stolen data, have been selectively leaked to the local press. The leak is selective: they have put in the complaints that were made, but not the fact that they were dismissed. People like this constantly make complaints about women MPs; they are spurious, but they do it to try to grind them down. There are letters that I sent in reply, but not the original correspondence. I do not know who has done this, but I know why: it is payback, because I have been supporting constituents trying to defend the last green space in north Warrington from development, and because I have said that the local council was wrong to buy a business park through an offshore trust that meant it avoided paying tax. All these things are clear. They are meant to silence women MPs and to ensure that our voices are not heard in the public sphere at all. They are meant to prevent us from speaking, not for ourselves but for our constituents.

Why do we carry on doing it? In my view, we do it because—my constituents deserve it—they deserve my standing up for them. They have returned me at six general elections, so I think I must be doing something right. We should never, ever accept this behaviour as normal, in the same way that we should never accept
threats of violence as normal. It is part of a continuum aimed at women MPs. It is time it stopped and it is time political parties made sure it is stopped.

3.8 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on bringing this debate to the Chamber. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who made some important comments.

A lot of people have raised the subject of intimidation in connection with the UK, but I would like to raise it from an international perspective. It is absolutely essential that MPs have a role in foreign affairs; it is essential that we play that role. I have taken a stand against Russia, for example, that has not led to any intimidation yet, but I have also taken a stand in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has led to intimidation and a series of more than 30 emails threatening me with death. The conversations that generated them started with a UK boy, who was clearly pro-Palestinian, asking me what I made of the Israeli bombs falling on Palestine. I replied, “What do you make of the Palestinian bombs falling on Israel?” For that I was put on a death list and my name was not taken off it. When I told the Serjeant at Arms, I was told to queue up with the 180 other MPs who had received death threats, which goes to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire made about our needing to make sure that our own system here for dealing with such issues takes them seriously and provides a good service for MPs.

In contrast was the reaction of my own chief constable, who told me that she would give the case to a chief inspector who normally dealt with these things, and if he saw something there, he would take further action. I said no more about it to my family, I went away, forgot it and got on with my work, but at 2 o’clock in the morning my house had a panic alarm installed by the police and I was given a telephone number that I could ring from my mobile or my home address where that would scramble a helicopter from the local base and set in train a response unit from the Thames Valley headquarters in Kidlington. If I dialled it now, of course, it would take two days for the response unit to reach us, which would probably be too late, so I suppose there is a small mercy in that.

The death threat was supposed to intimidate me into taking a position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on which I had actually taken a very even view throughout. It made me want to go out to the region to see what was happening. I have now been out to the region 10 times in the past seven years to see for myself what is happening, and I have had discussions on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides to be able to take the matter forward.

The really frightening thing has been mentioned by others. I run my office in a large and long constituency that makes it hard to take a stand and I have not been, regardless of my views, threatened with any kind of violence. The intimidation did not work and there is a very good reason why it did not work, apart from my own attitude to it. I do not think that such intimidation should ever work. We all have to stand up and make sure that our voices are heard. We need to stand up to bullies wherever they come from and make sure that we are true to ourselves and to our own intelligence and logic in assessing such situations.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On standing up to people, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that in the wider discourse we make it clear that, whatever our views are on somewhat controversial issues, we can express them clearly, directly and even vehemently, but there is a line that Members of Parliament, other elected representatives or people outside must never cross: violence—the threat of violence, the use of violence or the endorsing of violence? If everybody understands that, we can have a much more measured debate in future.

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. I agree with every word. The problem is that not everyone outside understands what that line is. That is the difficulty. We in this room can understand exactly where that line is, but there are those outside who do not understand it and that is a source of great regret to me, as I am sure it is for him and for all others in this room.

We need to stand up to bullies wherever they are. We need to be true to our own views, however we have come to them and however different they might be from other people’s. I certainly was not going to be intimidated by the group, and I have not been, regardless of my views, ever since.

3.15 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Streeter. I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for securing this debate. His constituency has a beautiful name. I would definitely like to visit. I thank him for setting the scene so well and for all his work in this area, in which he has been assiduous.

I want to start by thinking about where I was at in July 2017 when this debate last came to the Chamber and about whether things have improved. In many ways things have got worse. I will mention briefly, because the case is ongoing, Councillor Graeme Campbell in my constituency. Yesterday we heard on the news that his garage and house had been petrol-bombed, which he believes, and has said in public on the news, was linked to a planning case in which he was discharging his duties as a councillor. Our thoughts are definitely with him and his family. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] We stand with him across parties. We have to make sure that councillors are also protected.

In my own recent case, a man pleaded guilty to sending me abusive messages. He had previously come to my surgery and asked for help. I had tried to help him by writing to the Government on his behalf, but unfortunately they said they could not take his case any further, and, following that, I appeared to become a target. He has now been given a four-year non-harassment order after quite a lengthy court procedure. Two other cases are ongoing. In one, my office was attacked and in...
another. I had death threats cut out from newspaper words, put together and sent to me. When I worked as a doctor, I could not have believed this would happen to anyone in public life. It certainly does not in any other form of public life that I am aware of, but it is becoming the norm nowadays in our society in respect of political discourse and actions towards politicians.

I contributed to Lord Bew’s report in 2017. What is happening with the recommendations? Some good things have been done. The issue of social media has been taken forward by the Government and by the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, who really gets it and gets that it is very difficult. If someone thinks they are anonymous, it is almost as if they have carte blanche to say and do what they want, and then they are emboldened to abuse, but that work is going well.

Some of the recommendations were specifically for political parties:

“Political parties must...work together to tackle the issue of intimidation in public life.”

That recommendation was meant to be taken up immediately. What has happened? Have political parties worked or come together to discuss the issue? I have not heard anything. The report also stated:

“Political parties should set clear expectations” about Members’ conduct.

They should be, “consistently and appropriately disciplined in a timely manner.”

In my experience, that has never been the case. I am on the appeals committee for my own party and have not heard a single appeal all year since being elected, so I am not sure how things are processed, but they certainly never get to appeal. How is that being followed up? There is to be a joint code of conduct for elections. What has happened to it, and how will it be brought forward? It must be done quickly.

With respect to Lord Bew’s report, I notice that parties provided an overview of their codes of conduct, but there was not one for my party. I am not sure whether that is because Lord Bew did not contact them, or whether he did not have a response. I shall be following that up with the party, to try to find out.

In 2017, there were instances when I had to attend meetings as a candidate in the election and I knew I would face verbal abuse, but I did not get a response from the party. When someone thinks there is a high risk, and highlights that, they should get support and guidance. I attended those meetings with my children at times, because they were local meetings, with party members. No advice or support came in 2017, and there is still none in 2019. It is disappointing, and it emboldens individuals to carry on as they have been doing.

There has been no disciplinary follow-up since I complained. I want to make the point that that emboldens people, and I know it led to other incidents that I experienced. Individuals tried to prevent me from attending a Remembrance Day service last year, for instance. I was the only MP to have a campaign meeting called at exactly the time when the service was due to take place. It was to try to stop me going. When I complained, the meeting went ahead and those involved said they did not know 11 November was Remembrance Day. That seemed to be accepted, although I do not know how it could possibly be the case. It was the centenary of the end of the first world war, and was all over the media.

In 2015, way before that incident, the same individuals called me to a meeting to ask me to explain why someone had said online that I was an agent of Israel and was among “shameless British parliamentarians willing to sacrifice freedom of expression to please their paymasters”.

The message went on: “British politics must cleanse itself of this corrosive influence...Zionist corruption which has implanted its roots in pretty much every British Parliamentary party.”

I was asked to explain that. I was not asked how I or my family felt about it, or whether I was okay and whether we were coping. I was asked why the individual had said it. Obviously, I have a Jewish family background, which gives a link to why I was targeted; but I experienced no support.

I am describing these things not out of pity for myself, but because we need to look at democracy and to think about women in politics and people from ethnic minority and religious minority backgrounds who want to come into politics and represent people to the best of their abilities. We must work together. We must come together on a cross-party basis, show leadership, and ensure that such things are dealt with appropriately and that people coming into politics get support rather than abuse in the future.

3.23 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). I have travelled with her on a trip about antisemitism and I know some of the things that she has gone through. It was a brave speech, and I hope she will not now be called in to explain that; but I experienced no support.

I am describing these things not out of pity for myself, but because we need to look at democracy and to think about women in politics and people from ethnic minority and religious minority backgrounds who want to come into politics and represent people to the best of their abilities. We must work together. We must come together on a cross-party basis, show leadership, and ensure that such things are dealt with appropriately and that people coming into politics get support rather than abuse in the future.

I did not come into politics or this House with any soft view of what the job would involve. I cut my political teeth in Humberside politics. I was one of two Tories on Hull City Council and to be called “Tory scum” was fairly usual for me in my 10 years there. We all, to an extent, probably grow a thick skin as a result of such things, and I am not asking for special treatment. However, when I was elected in 2010 I did not expect a situation in which, because of death threats and various other incidents, including some public incidents, I would have restraining orders against people, my house would have panic alarms, and court cases would be brought against people who had done things to me. The police have generally been very good, but the sole reason for the collapse of the case against two people who were twice involved in incidents against me in the street, in Doncaster and Scunthorpe, was the failings of Humberside police, and I have not yet received a satisfactory response on that. Despite their racist and antisemitic abuse, those two individuals continue to walk around scot-free.
I never expected any of that to happen, and we must do something to try to address it, within parties but also more broadly. We need to consider whether the offences in place are acceptable, to protect not just ourselves as parliamentary candidates but those around us, including our families—my dad has been subjected to threats in the pub—our staff and, of course, our constituents who want to share their political views. As many colleagues have said, the issue is getting worse, not better. It almost does not matter what the subject is. I have a few examples of comments I received after speaking in debates. After a Holocaust Memorial Day debate I received the message: “What a piece of utter Scum you are. Keep on lying and living a lie”.

It was not just an email. It was followed up with telephone calls to both my constituency offices and my Westminster office, saying exactly the same thing: “Tell Andrew Percy he’s a piece of scum and he’s perpetuating a lie.”

I had another comment following the appearance of an article. A particularly insidious source of a lot of the abuse is the sites that purport to be news sites and that are effectively partisan fake news sites. Some have been set up to support particular political leaders and people spend much of their time abusing Members of Parliament of a particular party. An article went up on one of them. I do not read those things, and cannot remember which one it was. The immediate response came in, beginning “Double chinned hypocritical tosser”. It went on:

“Why the problem eating your own words? It’s not like your gormless flabby face can’t fit them.”

I look in the mirror and see a perfectly proportioned, good looking, handsome young man, but that does seem to be a theme.

Another message came as a result of a campaign when my local Labour party retweeted something about me. The first message that came in said:

“Wow nice to see a fat slop Tory twat voting to”—

blah, blah, blah. Now, I can look at that and laugh about it, but actually it is personal abuse based on someone’s personal appearance.

Helen Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can laugh, but in a way that is normalising the abuse, which we should not do? One of my colleagues was called an agent of Mossad, to which I said, “Don’t deny it—let them think you’re Mossad,” but we should not do that.

Andrew Percy: That is absolutely right. While I say I can laugh at it, and I do so because I will not allow those people to get to me, the fact is that that sort of highly personalised abuse would not be tolerated in any other working environment. It would not have been tolerated when I was a school teacher. I certainly would not tolerate it from the pupils, and they would not get it from me. Nor would it be tolerated among other staff or professionals. So, yes, we can laugh about it in one respect, but all that that does is desensitise us to the stuff.

Social media and fake news websites are of course part of the problem. Some of the fake stuff goes on Facebook, and social media are a particularly insidious source. The reason I left Twitter was that after a visit to Israel I was accused of being an agent of Mossad, being paid in shekels, wanting to murder Palestinian children, and all the rest of it. So I decided to leave Twitter, and it was the best thing I ever did for my mental health. The serious point is that with social media we invite this stuff into our home. Reading it sitting at home on a Friday or Saturday night, having had something to eat and a glass of wine or some beer, it starts to have an effect. I realised it was affecting me, and I was obsessing over what was being said. I decided to leave Twitter and social media altogether at that point, and have been happier as a result.

The downside of that, of course, relates to the good I was able to use Twitter for. We have a lot of flooding in my area, and we could use it to get messages out quickly. I lost that direct contact with some of my constituents. That relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire made, that the unintended consequence of continued abuse is its potential to distance Members of Parliament from their constituents and the public even more.

Brexit is, of course, a particular source of such abuse, and one tweet that I received recently contained a very rude word. Following an appearance about Brexit on “Brexitcast”, one of the first responses I received was:

“Utter, utter cunts the lot of you, even more stupid than a cunt.”

That is the sort of abuse we are receiving, and it is happening in both directions on this issue. I do not agree with Nigel Farage about many things, but I do not agree with him being abused. Today, however, Chorlton Brewery tweeted to say that, quite apart from throwing a milkshake,

“Hit them over the head with a brick” instead. That is not acceptable. Whatever we think of people such as Mr Farage, or anybody else in politics, encouraging people to commit acts of violence, and hoping to trend on Twitter—that might be the result if anybody is watching this—is not acceptable. We must toughen up the law, but the parties have to act as well. We have all failed to deal with some of our own party members who have been involved in some of this behaviour, and we must get tougher and quicker at addressing that.

3.30 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for securing this debate, which is ultimately about the nature of our democracy. When disagreement is expressed in a hateful, vile manner that is intended to intimidate, it is a threat to the very foundations on which democracy is built. There can be no doubt that the poison, hatred and abuse faced by almost every serving elected representative to the House must give anyone who might be considering entering public life pause for thought. The sad fact is that I genuinely hesitated before participating in this debate, since there is a view out there—I do not suggest it is universal, but it does exist—that serving elected representatives should not be debating this issue. We should just suck it up, because that is politics.

For some, engaging in politics in an abusive and intimidating way is the new normal, and if someone does not like it, they should go and do something else. Sadly, even the value of democracy has become open to question in some quarters. All hon. Members understand
that the mere fact of participating in this debate may open us up to more abuse being heaped on us, and for that reason my colleague, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), withdrew her name from those due to speak in the debate. With the exception of Scotland’s First Minister, she is the most abused female politician—if not the most abused politician—in Scottish politics.

Much online abuse—perhaps not all—is facilitated by the mere fact of anonymity. Online someone can pour abuse and intimidation on to whoever they decide they do not like. They can send abusive Facebook messages and retain their anonymity, or they can hide their identity behind a Twitter handle. If someone’s identity is not revealed, the theory goes that they can say whatever they like. They can move on from disagreeing with the views of an elected representative in a vile and hateful manner, and slip easily into threats that are designed to intimidate. They can comment in any way they like—after all, elected representatives are fair game, are they not?

If we do not agree with a political party or politician, democracy demands that we take them on through argument in a constructive and respectful manner. I have absolutely no time for Nigel Farage, but like many others, I do not think for one second that what happened to him yesterday was acceptable. If we cannot challenge our opponents with arguments, respectfully, we have already lost. I am deeply concerned by the examples of abuse that we have heard about today. Sadly, however, for too many the poison, abuse, and attempts to intimidate are what pass for political discourse in some quarters.

Where does all this hatred and poisonous bile come from? It comes from a variety of sources—we could probably have an entire debate on that—but there is no doubt that, as I found out to my cost, it can be stirred up by some sections of the tabloid press. Recently, a freeze frame photo of me in the Chamber, which lasted about one second, was published in a way to suggest that I was asleep on the job. I am sure that when the journalist printed that story it seemed like a jolly good wheeze, but as a direct result of that story—it was categorically untrue, and if someone had watched the film for another 30 seconds they would have seen it was untrue—I encountered, entirely predictably, the most horrific abuse, which was designed to intimidate me for having seemed to do something I had not done. Given the toxic nature of our politics, that shamefully bad and dangerous piece of so-called journalism was not worthy of the name. Over time, however, such pieces diminish, denigrate and belittle all elected representatives, and corrode the basis of democracy itself.

No one should be abused and intimidated simply for doing their job, yet it is now unusual to come across an MP who has not received a death threat. Some of my colleagues have suffered the most appalling abuse, as have others across the House. We could say that that is because politics has become polarised, toxic and so on, but it is also because we who serve in public life have become fair game. Apparently, tolerating intimidation and abuse has become part of our job description.

It has been said that we in public life have a duty to uphold the standards that we wish to see, which is correct, and we must also be careful with our language. Disagreement—including robust disagreement—is absolutely fine and the lifeblood of political discourse, but when it turns into personal abuse or hate-filled rants, it has become something else entirely. Studies have been carried out into abuse in public life and much has been written about it. We know that the police take it seriously, but in reality it is not just respect for elected representatives that has declined; it is respect for the democratic process itself.

Somehow—I do not pretend to have the answers—we need to help the public rediscover and rebuild their respect for the political process and those who serve in public life. If we fail to do that—I appreciate that it is a huge task—I fear that more elected representatives will come to harm in the course of doing their job. Even more than that, I fear that the very essence and value of democracy will continue to decline in the long term. The press also has a part to play. Of course those serving in public life should be held accountable, but let us make that about the arguments, not about tittle-tattle and gossip.

My own fear—I hope I am wrong—is that the Rubicon has been crossed and there is now a subculture in which someone can say what they want, and threaten whoever they want if they are standing for public office. Someone does not even need to be elected—just putting oneself forward for election is enough, apparently, to merit the most intimidatory behaviour. A culture of abuse and intimidation of elected representatives has been carefully cultivated in some quarters. It has gone unchecked and continues to be so. We can pass as many laws as we like, but the culture has to change. Where we are today is the culmination of that cultivation, aided and assisted by the apparent courage that anonymous postings on social media create, and whipped up by some sections of the tabloid press. This issue is bigger than any one individual; it is about the survival of our democratic system.

3.38 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this debate. He posed the question of whether the levels of intimidation in public life that we all face have got better or worse since the last time we debated this issue. I reflected that since we last discussed this matter, I took some time away from this place because I had a baby. I was shocked that the abuse that is received not just by politicians but by their family members extended even to a baby who was just a few days old, because somebody on social media decided that it was okay to wish that my baby would die. I felt that was very shocking. I had got used to the idea that, because I stood for public office and was a Member of this House, such abuse was almost part of the job and sort of expected. I did not, however, expect a tiny baby to be on the receiving end of such abuse, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate today. I know he will continue to champion this issue until we rid ourselves of this scourge and the way that political debate has gone in this country.

Intimidation, including death threats, criminal damage, sexism, racism, homophobia and antisemitism, has no place in our democracy, but they have been raised in our debate. On behalf of the Opposition, I condemn any action that undermines the integrity of our electoral process and our wider democratic values. It
is clear that no Member of the House, and certainly no Member taking part in the debate, will be intimidated by these people; regardless of the abuse scrolled on our offices, written on social media or screamed at us in the street, we will continue to do our job as parliamentarians and stand up for the values that we believe in and that the vast majority of our constituents obviously elect us for.

Unfortunately, violence against politicians is not particularly new. In 2010, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was stabbed at an advice surgery and the phenomenon was certainly brought home to us in 2016 with the tragic murder of our friend Jo Cox. In recent days, we have seen the conviction of a man for a credible plot to murder my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). These cases are probably quite prominent in the public mind, but Members who have taken part in the debate, and many Members who were too afraid to take part, have experienced much more.

Candidates are often targeted because of their gender, sexuality or ethnicity, which reflects the wider context of discrimination that targets individuals on the basis of their identity. Particularly concerning is the scale of abuse experienced by women MPs and the emergence of an organised far-right presence on the streets of British cities and across Europe.

The exponential growth of social media has caused the level of abuse to rise in recent years, with online platforms creating unprecedented levels of transparency in political discourse but reducing the perceived barrier between the electorate and politicians. The hon. Member for Briggs and Goole (Andrew Percy) really brought home to us when explaining how he has come off social media, which in many ways disadvantages him as a local politician as he is not able to have direct contact with his constituents. There is no easy, single solution to address this problem, and the Opposition welcome the package of recommendations outlined by the Committee on Standards in Public Life for the Government, social media companies, political parties, the police, broadcast and print media, MPs and parliamentary candidates.

Turning to potential cross-party actions, it is worth prefacing that with the recognition that many abusers, particularly anonymous trolls on the internet, may not be members of a political party. This complex issue requires those across public life to work together, and the Opposition welcome the cross-party action taking place in response to the committee’s inquiry. On 27 March, representatives of the Labour party, the Green party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party attended the second meeting held by the committee, during which Labour put forward our initial proposal for a joint code of conduct, providing a suggested framework that could be adopted by political parties. That was one of the committee’s recommendations, and we await feedback from other parties.

In response, the committee’s chair, Lord Evans, said:

“It is clear that political parties have done a great deal of work internally to address intimidatory behaviour and improve their own processes to call out and address unacceptable behaviour wherever they can. Building on that, there is a good will and commitment from those political parties who attended our meeting on 27 March to make further joint progress.”

Although representatives of the Conservative party and Plaid Cymru were not able to attend that meeting, we are pleased that those parties have confirmed their commitment to making further joint progress. I thank the Minister for that. I am sure that Members across the House welcome the Jo Cox Foundation agreeing to act as independent support for that cross-party work.

The Labour party’s rules make it clear that abuse, bullying or intimidation of any kind are considered grossly detrimental or prejudicial to the Labour party, and that members engaging in such behaviour can expect to be subject to our disciplinary procedures. In September 2016, our national executive committee agreed a members’ pledge and a new social media code of conduct to further address concerns about bullying and harassment. We are considering ways in which our existing codes of conduct can be strengthened in response to the committee’s inquiry, and we are reviewing the ways in which we use digital media and communications to clearly communicate to both existing and new members our party’s rules and expectations about the standard of behaviour that we expect to be upheld.

The Cabinet Office has a key role in ensuring that sufficient safeguards are in place to protect parliamentary candidates and party campaigners from intimidation. I thank the Minister for making moves to ensure that, for the very first time, home addresses were not on ballot papers for local election candidates this May.

Andrew Percy: That is all very well and good, but there are obviously particular problems on the hon. Lady’s side at the moment, which have led to members of her party leaving. From her position, which is important to the debate, will she condemn absolutely—as we all should—people who address rallies at which people call for Members to be lynched or hold signs of a decapitated Prime Minister?

Cat Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right that parliamentarians should expect to be held to a higher standard than ordinary party members. That is why I am planning to follow up with my party the issues raised in the debate—particularly those raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones). I am happy to look into cases raised by any Member who takes part in the debate.

On the electoral consequences, I look forward to hearing from the Minister about his recent announcement about barring people from running for office if they have been found guilty of intimidating or abusive behaviour. The Government moved away from their initial proposal to create a new, specific offence in either the general criminal law or electoral law, which we and various legal commentators would support. Instead, as set out in the recent consultation paper, “Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information”, the Cabinet Office indicated that a conviction for the prescribed offence of violence or intimidation committed in the context of an election would be treated as a “corrupt practice” for the purpose of imposing penalties such as disqualification from seeking elected office.

The Opposition agree that electoral law should deal with the consequences of this kind of serious misconduct. However, it is widely accepted that comprehensive reform of electoral law is needed, and that grafting these new
provisions on to the existing outdated, inadequate and inconsistent body of law on electoral misconduct would simply compound the problems associated with the law as its stands; an hon. Member raised the complexity of electoral law and how difficult it is for the police to take action during tight election periods. I am sure the Minister agrees that the very fact that the Government propose to treat intimidation as a form of “corrupt practice” underlines the archaic nature of the terminology used in current electoral law.

It is a matter of concern that the Government have still not responded to the Law Commission’s 2016 joint interim report, which calls for the introduction of a single legal framework for UK elections. Will the Minister inform the House when his Department intends to respond to that important report? The Law Commission recommended that all electoral offences, including “undue influence”, should be reviewed, redrafted and set out in a single set of provisions applying to all elections. Labour supports that proposal, as simpler and more modern provisions would secure greater compliance among campaigners, the public, the police and prosecution services. Appropriate electoral sanctions for violent, threatening and intimidatory conduct in the course of election activity should be addressed as part of that wider package of reforms.

It is important that the police have the resources to make sure that the law is upheld. Many parliamentarians have told me that investigations have been cut short because of a lack of police resources; indeed, I have CCTV footage of people vandalising my office, and I can identify one of them, but the police are not pursuing it. What actions does the Minister think the Government should take to make sure that the police have the resources to ensure that the law is upheld?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I call the Minister to respond. He will leave the proposer of the debate one minute to have the final word.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): Thank you, Sir Gary; it is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this important debate and thank him for his work on this issue, particularly as a member of the Committee on Standards and Public Life and the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I also note the presence of Lord Bew, a former chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, who has played a pivotal part in work in this area.

Unsurprisingly, this debate, in which we have heard about the personal experiences of many Members of Parliament, has been very powerful. I welcome the fact that, although we may disagree on many other issues, the main parties—the Government, the Opposition and the Scottish National party—have spoken as one in making it clear that argument, not intimidation, should determine what happens in our country and that we cannot allow our democracy to be undermined by those who wish to use practices that are actually criminal offences and are totally unacceptable in order to skew debate.

It was certainly interesting to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who outlined some of the issues that he has had with fake news sites. I think that also, clearly, we need to reflect on how we react when things are put online. Do we react immediately? There is a culture of putting out a quote when actually it might be better to allow proper investigations to take place. We also need to think about how we upskill people to identify what is fake and what has some credibility to it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out that we should not be silenced because we wish to take a position on an international issue, just for fear that someone may send abusive mail.

The two speeches that particularly stood out for me were those by the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). Both of them bravely shared very personal stories of what they have experienced just for wanting to stand up and be present. I make it clear that standing up, getting involved, wanting to be part of debate and being passionate about the issues that we believe in is not a provocation; it is what democracy is inherently about. It is right that when people decide, for reasons of jealousy or whatever else—misogyny is sadly all too common still—that they cannot accept a democratic result, they cannot then behave in a manner that goes totally against the spirit of democracy and living in a free society.

This debate is a timely review following another debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire previously led in this Chamber almost two years ago, when, sadly, Members from both sides of the House also recounted some truly appalling abuse that they and their colleagues had been subjected to. As my hon. Friend rightly said in a recent article, this is not about “brittle political egos”, but about dealing with crime—dealing with behaviour that we and society believe should be criminal.

My hon. Friend’s previous debate came on the same day as our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that she had asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to carry out a review of the intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates. I shall focus my remarks on what the Government have been doing in response to that review to play our part in building a democracy in which every voice can be heard.

Recently, we have witnessed a worrying rise in the levels of violence and abuse in our public life and across political debate. That risks not only putting voters off politics but putting talented people from all backgrounds off wanting to stand for public office. As a couple of hon. Members have said, a thick skin cannot become the most important prerequisite for taking up a role in public life or standing for election, particularly if we want the most diverse range of people to be represented in our politics and if we want representatives to be able to be open about who they are and not feel that they have to hide away or keep things in a closet for fear of abuse and intimidation.

An atmosphere in which threats of violence and abuse are normalised also risks lives. We saw the worst manifestation of that when our dear friend and colleague Jo Cox was tragically murdered in 2016. She rightly said that we have
“more in common than that which divides us.”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

I was therefore pleased to read the letter and joint statement that has gone out to say from the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Jo Cox Foundation about the work that they will be looking to do together to continue her legacy.

As hon. Members mentioned, we also saw this type of behaviour more recently, with a neo-Nazi plot to murder the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), for which a man was sentenced and imprisoned for life just last week.

Those, though, are the headline and most serious cases. As today’s debate has shown, there are too many examples of abuse and intimidation that Members of this place have been subjected to. Freedom of speech is a human right, but it is not an excuse for people to break the law by threatening or abusing a candidate or campaigner whose views they do not agree with. Let me say clearly and with no equivocation that such abuse is wrong and unacceptable and must be addressed.

We must also think beyond this place. The toxicity extends beyond Westminster to the lives of hard-working teachers, nurses, doctors, judges and police officers, who are also too often victims and targets of toxicity, intimidation and violence. All those in public life have a responsibility to challenge and report intimidating behaviour wherever it occurs. We must all seek to uphold the highest standards of conduct and we must set a tone in our own discourse that is neither dehumanising nor derogatory.

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY in the Chair]

In 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life considered this issue, as well as the broader implications for other candidates for public office and public office holders. I thank the members of the Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire, for their thorough consideration of this topic. The committee subsequently published its report, “Intimidation in Public Life”, in December 2017, and concluded that intimidation in public life presented a threat to the very nature of representative democracy and that electoral law needed to be updated better to reflect the challenges that we now face.

In the Government response to the Committee’s report, we committed to a series of actions based on the Committee’s recommendations. In March of this year, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), issued a written statement updating Parliament on the work that the Government had done in response to the report. It may be useful if I briefly update the House on that.

The recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life included two that fall within the remit of the Cabinet Office. I am pleased to say that the recommendation on removing the requirement for local government candidates to publish their home address has already been implemented, and the recommended consultation on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law of intimidating candidates and campaigners has also been completed. I can confirm that we will move to do the same for the elections due to be held in May of next year for the Greater London Assembly and police and crime commissioners.

Andrew Percy: Will my hon. Friend the Minister look again at this matter? It is absolutely right to remove the addresses of local government candidates, but some candidates said to me that there was a bit of a political risk in that. The ballot paper just showing the address as, in my case, in the East Riding of Yorkshire could be, given that some people have a local address on, a bit of a disadvantage.

Kevin Foster: It will obviously be a discussion for each candidate as to whether they wish to show an address. Again, it is a debate. I would be happy to hear any suggestions as to how—

Andrew Percy: By ward.

Kevin Foster: It could be by the ward rather than by the district. It will always be a debate and a decision for candidates to make, but this is a step that we have taken. The alternative was to be compelled to put one’s home address on the ballot paper. But of course the Government will be interested to hear further feedback about how we can improve and refine the system.

We have also committed to legislating on the introduction of a new electoral offence of intimidating a candidate or campaigner during the run-up to an election, either in person or online. Under the new measure, people who intimidate candidates or campaigners in the run-up to an election will be banned from running for public office for up to five years. To be clear, that will not extend the offence as such, but it will give the courts a new deterrent to such behaviour in relation to those in the political world. In response to a point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), I should say that this is about being clear that we are not in any special category. The law will apply the same. It is about how the penalty could be applied in relation to the political world.

We will also legislate to clarify the electoral offence of undue influence of a voter. That offence, which includes acts or threats of violence to manipulate someone’s vote, will cover intimidation inside and outside the polling station. Clarifying the offence in electoral law will enable enforcement agencies to enact sanctions more effectively, to protect voters from undue influence.

The Government have consulted on our “Internet Safety Strategy” Green Paper and published a White Paper on online harms. In addition, we have held discussions with social media companies and the Electoral Commission about how a pop-up social media team for elections could provide support for users who report inappropriate behaviour online.

Over and above the recommendation in the Committee’s report, the Government are considering what further steps are necessary to ensure the safety of parliamentarians and their staff. Crucially, that will apply not only to the vicinity of the parliamentary estate but to our constituencies and online. There are already opportunities through the parliamentary liaison and investigation team. This is about being clear that we must ensure that arrangements are proportionate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire said, our offices should be places where we welcome the majority of those we represent and should not become like a mini fortress.
I hope that I have been able to reassure not only my hon. Friend but other hon. Members present that the Government are taking this matter seriously and wish to act on it. Ensuring that we tackle intimidation is about making sure that our democracy is the vibrant one that we all wish it to be.

3.59 pm

Simon Hart: I thank colleagues and particularly the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), for their contributions. Obviously, numerous people are interested in this topic. Perhaps we can look at devising a mechanism by which all the disparate views and proposals can be tied together. It has been suggested to me that a Speaker’s Conference would be one way forward, but the Government would need to sanction that. Finally, on the question of leadership, party political leadership is absolutely crucial. Codes of practice are all very well, but they have to be enforced and seen to be enforced, and that is just as applicable to senior Members, such as the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, as it is to anybody else.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered intimidation in public life.

Debt Collection Letters

4 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the content of debt collection letters.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I have been working with the charity the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute. I sit on its advisory board, along with hon. Members from other parties, including the hon. Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). It was set up in 2016 by Martin Lewis from Money Saving Expert. Money and Mental Health has been conducting valuable research into the link between financial difficulty and mental ill health, and leading campaigns to bring about reform where it identifies a problem.

The link between debt and mental ill health is striking. People with mental health problems are three times more likely to be in problem debt as those without mental health problems. Half of adults in problem debt have a mental health problem. Research by Money and Mental Health found that in England each year, more than 100,000 people in problem debt attempt to take their own life and more than 420,000 people in debt consider suicide. This is an incredibly serious issue.

Several factors contribute to that link between financial difficulty and mental ill health, but one important issue—the subject of this debate—is debt collection letters. They are written in a way that can make people feel that there is no way out of their financial problems, sometimes leading to disastrous and fatal consequences. I will give a couple of brief case studies.

Paul lives with bipolar. Throughout his life he has suffered from mental ill health, which has been compounded by debt problems. When he was on a high, he would go out on spending sprees funded by loans; during periods of depression, he would struggle to pay his bills and often spend money to make himself feel better—it was a sort of escape from the nightmare and trauma he was going through.

Paul said that being hounded by creditors left him feeling trapped and helpless. He tragically made attempts on his own life. Like so many others in debt, Paul received letters from lenders, which are intimidating, often written in complex language and can feature threats of court action right at the top, very prominently. Sometimes people receive such letters from multiple lenders on a daily basis, leaving them feeling trapped in the nightmare engulfing them. Paul says, “the letters that you get from creditors are horrendous. They were like someone standing in front of me with a knife, so I wanted to get rid of them. I’d just put them straight in the bin or burn them... You feel trapped by your debt, and that you can’t get out—that’s what can drive people to feel suicidal”.

Thankfully, Paul is now in a much better place with support from his family.

I have witnessed people who, when confronted by letters demanding payment, hide away and do not confront the problem, because of the state of their mental health. Sometimes they put letters into cupboards, hoping that
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman gave two powerful examples. This is reality. This is life. People are getting these letters and thinking about committing suicide. After a decade of austerity, things are not improving. Does he agree that it is time that the Government gave new guidelines to stop these letters coming through the door and threatening people? We need to examine this more and I therefore welcome this debate.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman goes to the heart of what I am proposing. I will expand on the point he made.

Debt collection letters, like the ones received by Paul and Jerome, often include complex text, which is capitalised and put in bold. The language can be intimidating to someone experiencing mental ill health. The letters often start with threats of court action. They do contain advice—the purpose is well meaning in terms of the legislative requirements.

However, the wording they are required to use is inaccurate and out of date. It was devised before free debt advice was widely available. Recipients are told to get help from a solicitor, from their local trading standards department or a citizens advice bureau. However, trading standards can only help someone when a company’s behaviour is illegal, not in an ordinary civil situation. Therefore, that advice, in wording required by the Government, is inaccurate and should not be there.

The idea that someone in problem debt should be told in official advice to seek out a solicitor is outdated and frankly ridiculous for many people who would just assume that going to a solicitor is impossible, due to the cost involved. The advice is so out of date because, outrageously, the content of these letters is dictated by legislation that has not been updated for decades. Lenders are legally obliged to include certain pieces of prescribed content, as is laid out in the Consumer Credit Act 1974 and the Consumer Credit (Enforcement, Default and Termination Notices) Regulations 1983.

The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute’s “Stop the #DebtThreats” campaign calls on the Government to amend the Consumer Credit Act and the associated regulations, to put a stop to the threatening letters. First, the Government should change the prescribed content of lenders’ letters, exactly as the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) suggested. The Government should make these letters more accessible, easier to understand and clearer for people in problem debt.

If the Minister is tempted to say that he is supportive of the principle involved here, but it involves a comprehensive review of the Consumer Credit Act and the whole thing will take a long time, I do not buy it. There is clearly a case for a review of the primary legislation, but the wording of the letter, which is out of date and inappropriate, could be changed quickly through regulations. There is a real danger that we overcomplicate this. Those regulations could be made in a straightforward way quickly, pending a wider review of how we deal with these issues. One sensible idea is to refer the matter across to the Financial Conduct Authority. The step could be taken immediately to get rid of the inappropriate and inaccurate prescribed wording, which simply should not be there and makes things more difficult for people.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that putting the threat of court action first puts people off reading the rest of the letter? What should be first is the fact that help is available for people to get debt advice, and that it does not have to be face to face—advice is available online and on the telephone. There is a wide range of support that was not there before, which needs to be highlighted.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The guidance we had from organisations before the debate makes the point that the letters are often lengthy. People in a state of anxiety and distress will give up reading something complex before they reach the helpful advice, which might be right at the end. There needs to be clear information up front about seeking advice. It is in the interest of the creditor to refer people to that advice straightaway and put it up front, and the Government’s prescribed wording could require that, which is what we are calling for.

There is also a danger that the Minister might say, “People nowadays can just google it and get access to good advice online,” but when people google for debt advice, the options at the top of the list are for paid-for advice, which is inappropriate. The information that people need should be in the prescribed wording of the letters that creditors have to send. The Government could do something about that quickly.

The Government should stipulate that creditors should signpost people to sources of support, which is really important, as the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) said. People should be directed to the free specialist debt advice provided by charities such as StepChange and Citizens Advice. Exactly as she said, that should be at the start of the letter and should take precedence over threats of court action. Jerome’s mother Tracey and Paul are backing the “Stop the #DebtThreats” campaign.

Last week, the Treasury Committee made a welcome intervention in its report “Consumers’ access to financial services”, which recommended that the Government amend the relevant legislation and reform the content of debt collection letters. It also recommended that debt collection letters contain “a form of words that would be clear and understandable for an individual with a low level of literacy”, and that the Government “mandate the inclusion—with equal prominence to the demand for payment—of information within such requests of how an individual can seek help with their debts.”
The pressure on the Treasury is mounting and we hope that there will be a constructive response. We are calling on the Government to amend the legislation and regulations that govern the content of debt letters. As I said earlier, they should do what is necessary, which they can do quickly by making the wording on the letters more helpful and by getting rid of the inappropriate and inaccurate wording, and then look to wider reform later.

As I indicated, another way to achieve change in the longer run would be to delegate the control of debt letter content requirements to the Financial Conduct Authority. There is an opportunity here, as the FCA recently completed a statutory review of the Consumer Credit Act, which acknowledged several concerns about the rules on content. The review highlighted the possibility of the FCA taking control of and updating the rules. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response to that suggestion.

Debt collection letters from lenders are just one of many problems that people in financial difficulties face. I also support an initiative that proposes bailiff regulation, which has been put together by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). We and other hon. Members have signed a joint letter to the Minister with responsibility for bailiffs to call for the behaviour of bailiffs to be regulated.

The behaviour of bailiffs is another key problem for people in debt, as Jerome Rogers experienced. According to Citizens Advice, more than 100,000 people have had bailiff-related problems in the last 12 months, which is an increase of 16% from the previous year. Some 40% of Citizens Advice clients with issues about bailiffs also had some sort of health condition, including mental ill health, but they often faced completely inappropriate behaviour by bailiffs. In its briefing for the debate, Citizens Advice highlights a number of highly inappropriate actions by bailiffs that have come to its attention.

The argument is that there needs to be a regulator for bailiffs, alongside reform to the wording of the letters. We believe that the Minister can act quickly and I hope that he will give a constructive response.

4.15 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for raising the important issue. I read his article in The Times Red Box today and I have looked into the matter in some depth. I hope that I will be able to respond to his core request.

The right hon. Gentleman is committed to helping to improve the lives of those with mental health problems. In particular, his efforts alongside those of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) during the passage of the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 have ensured that those in mental health crisis have an alternative access mechanism to enter breathing space, which is a policy I will touch on later.

I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the content of debt collection letters. I have an example here, and he is right to draw attention to the language used and its intimidating nature. I share his concerns regarding the impact that such letters can have on vulnerable people, as he set out clearly. I understand that 6,000 individuals have signed a petition by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute to call for the prescribed content in debt collection letters to be updated.

If hon. Members will permit me, I will set out the Government’s overarching objectives for the consumer credit market, then get to the core point. The Government’s vision is for a well-functioning and sustainable consumer credit market that can responsibly meet the needs of all consumers. Of course, that vision extends to how firms treat consumers when they encounter financial difficulties. That is why we fundamentally reformed the regulation of the consumer credit market by transferring regulatory responsibility from the Office of Fair Trading to the Financial Conduct Authority just over five years ago, on 1 April 2014. When that transfer took place, 82 sections of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 were repealed and replaced by FCA rules, but 167 sections could not be easily replicated and remained in the Act, including the sections that dictate the prescribed content of debt collection letters.

The information requirements in the 1974 Act aim to protect consumers by reducing the information asymmetry between firms and customers. Where there is a requirement for information to be reproduced using prescribed wording, that is intended to highlight important messages on a consistent basis and to ensure that firms give consumers the information that they need to make informed decisions, across the wide variety of consumer credit products.

The FCA had a statutory duty to review the retained sections of the Consumer Credit Act by 1 April 2019. Its review considered whether the remaining sections could be transferred to FCA rules, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested, without having an adverse impact on consumer protection, and whether those sections remained appropriate for today’s market. On 25 March 2019, the FCA’s final report was laid in Parliament. It is a substantial piece of work, as I am sure he knows. I welcome the report and the significant and extensive analysis undertaken by the FCA during the review.

The Government are undertaking a programme of work to review the FCA’s findings and consider whether further reform of the consumer regulatory regime is needed. Indeed, a few weeks ago, I had an extended session with officials to discuss the programme of work relating to the Consumer Credit Act and better understand the breadth and depth of the issues that are manifest in it.

I acknowledge the point that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk made about, essentially, a quick win with respect to the reform of the letter, leading to a more substantial and extensive piece of work, and I will examine carefully what he said and take that back with me, to try to understand what could be possible. As any financial services lawyer will attest, the Consumer Credit Act 1974 is a complex and technical beast, and we want to ensure that we take an holistic view of it, considering it in its entirety so that further complexity is not created and no adverse and unexpected outcomes arise. However, I recognise that changing the wording on a letter would not appear to be a significant issue with respect to the wider implications.
Norman Lamb: I appreciate the Minister’s constructive response. As an ex-lawyer, I think it is perfectly possible to address the real mischief here by adapting the letter using more constructive and up-to-date wording without undermining the broader objectives of the 1974 Act.

John Glen: The right hon. Gentleman rightly reiterates the challenge, and I take it on. At this point, I should also mention the reference he made to the work of the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) on bailiffs. There is absolutely no excuse for aggressive tactics from enforcement agents, and that is why the Ministry of Justice has launched a call for evidence, looking at the need for an independent regulator. The call closed in February 2019 and the Government will respond in the summer. I am meeting with the relevant Justice Minister just after the recess to press for robust action, so that is very much on my agenda as well. I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s portrayal of how deeply wrong some of those behaviours are.

Hugh Gaffney: Sometimes a letter gets passed on to another debt collection agency and then another, so pressure is being put on individuals all the time. If I remember rightly, each time a letter is passed on more money is added on. I ask the Minister to have a look at that.

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point, and that is something we need to examine carefully when we consider what needs to happen in this area. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Stakeholder views will be essential to inform the Government’s decision making, and I would welcome the opportunity to meet the right hon. Member for North Norfolk and any other interested colleagues across the House to better understand how important this issue should be addressed as our policy thinking progresses. During my time in office, I have encountered many individuals who have been in financially vulnerable circumstances and I have compassion for the unique challenges they face. Indeed, only last week I welcomed to the Treasury some individuals with lived experience of financial difficulty, to hear in more detail how they had got into those situations.

I would like to take this opportunity to assure the right hon. Member for North Norfolk that reviewing the mental health aspect of the prescribed content in debt collection letters will be top of my list of priorities during this programme of work. The issue requires continued dialogue to understand what the best outcome for these vulnerable individuals would be, and how best to deliver it. Given the letter’s rather terse words referring to a solicitor, which are really not appropriate and could have been written a long time ago, I will reflect on the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the changing nature of debt advice and about how best it can be presented.

That does not mean that those most at risk will not see benefit in the near future. I draw attention to the significant work that has been undertaken to meet the Government’s manifesto commitment of implementing a breathing space scheme, which I alluded to earlier. The scheme will give the most vulnerable consumers 60 days of respite from creditor action, to access debt advice and put their finances on a sustainable footing.

Yvonne Fovargue: Can the Minister confirm that the breathing space would also apply to statutory authorities, for example local authorities, which are possibly the biggest users of bailiffs?

John Glen: I will come on to that point in a few moments, but my instinct, as I think the hon. Lady knows from my visit to the all-party parliamentary group on debt and personal finance, is that if the breathing space does not contain the maximum amount of public sector debt it will not be meaningful. At this moment, however, I cannot formally confirm how the scheme will work, but I will say a few more things in a few minutes.

The Government set out the detailed policy for the breathing space scheme in a consultation launched in October 2018. As part of the scheme, firms will not be able to communicate directly with consumers to request repayment of debt. In particular, the consultation paper set out the design of an alternative access mechanism for those in mental health crisis. The mechanism would enable those individuals to enter breathing space without having directly accessed debt advice. I feel very strongly about the mechanism, as those suffering from a mental health crisis may find it particularly difficult to engage with debt advice services in the way that people without mental health challenges do.

The consultation closed in January 2019, and the Government will shortly publish a response to set out their approach to the whole scheme, before laying regulations to implement breathing space before the end of the year, which is when a comprehensive answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) will be provided.

In conclusion, I share the concerns raised by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk and recognise that, in certain cases, the content of debt collection letters can increase consumer harm. I hope I have assured him that the issue will be at the top of my list of priorities when considering further reform in the consumer credit regulatory framework. I take the point about whether the letter issue can be expedited separately, and I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman to better understand the most timely and effective way of remedying the problem. I thank him very much for bringing the matter to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Arthritis and Employment

4.26 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered arthritis and employment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham.

I am delighted that my application for a Westminster Hall debate has been successful, as it provides an opportunity to highlight arthritis, a condition with which we are all familiar. It is estimated that, in its various forms, it will affect approximately one in five individuals in the UK by 2050. Arthritis disrupts the body’s locomotor system, which is the bones, joints and muscles that facilitate a person’s movements. There are many types, and most people will have heard of osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, but there are other forms of inflammatory arthritis, and other inflammatory conditions such as lupus and polymyalgia rheumatica.

Arthritis is a frequently debilitating condition and does not, as some assume, affect only the older generations.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a very important subject. Like many Members, I have constituents and family members who are affected by arthritis. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when we consider people with arthritis and employment, and the benefit system related conditions experience daily pain. The condition severely impinges on their lifestyle, whether it be their ability to live independently, to care for family, to work, to travel or to take part in sports and hobbies, all of which, in some instances, may lead to social isolation. I recall at an event trying on a tight-fitting gauntlet with the purpose of experiencing the restrictions caused by arthritis of the wrist and hand. I was concerned to note how I lost my fine motor skills for even the simplest of tasks. It must be so frustrating to be faced with such difficulties on a daily basis.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on such an important subject. He speaks about social isolation; many people who suffer from arthritis have not been able to work for years, such as my constituent Russell, who came to my surgery. One of the things he does is volunteer: he is an ambassador, who goes out and helps other people in his community in a really positive way. However, he and potentially others have found that when they get expenses for helping out, they are charged as if they were in employment. Does my hon. Friend feel it is important that we make sure that people who want to volunteer when they can are able to do so without that fear?

Bill Grant: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. The modest expenses of somebody who makes a special effort to go and volunteer should not affect any other income that individual may have.

In my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, the second most common reason for awards of personal independence payments was musculoskeletal disease, including osteoarthritis, inflammatory arthritis and chronic pain syndrome, which accounted for some 20% of awards in the constituency. That is similar to the UK average of around 21%. Those of us who attended Versus Arthritis’s recent event in Parliament heard about new research, illustrating that some 43% of people with arthritis struggled with tasks at home, and some struggled for in excess of two years before sourcing equipment that could assist them.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is not just about struggling at home. About a quarter of people with disabilities who are employed said that they did not get the right sort of support: their employers had not got advice from Access to Work to try to make their lives easier. Does my hon. Friend think that is something we can tackle?

Bill Grant: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Access to Work is important, but as I will come on to later in my speech, it is not widely known about. The Government and Departments have more to do to promote that scheme and make people aware of it, so that workplaces can be made that bit more acceptable to individuals with particular disabilities.

Versus Arthritis’s “Room to Manoeuvre” campaign has been set up to improve access to aids and adaptations in the home and—I would hope—in the workplace, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) has suggested. Apparently, a remarkable 94% of people with arthritis said that those aids and adaptations had immensely improved their life. That independence is valuable to a person’s overall wellbeing, and reduces the strain on our NHS and local authorities.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. What Versus Arthritis is doing is fantastic, but does he agree that workers are now having to work longer, which they cannot do because of arthritis? This is not only about adaptations; there is a financial burden on them. What will this Government do for the people who have been forced to work longer for their pension?

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and to a degree, I accept his criticism. Consecutive Governments have made pension adjustments in 1995 and 2011 to reflect the equalisation of the pension age and people living longer; although I think we have plateaued in that regard. However, those who have disabilities and conditions such as arthritis will be impacted that bit more. For those who plan to continue a career but are impacted in extreme cases by disabilities such as arthritis, I agree with the hon. Gentleman.
Maybe we need to think about how we can assist those people’s allowances more when they have to retire early, before their planned retirement.

The MPs who attended the “Room to Manoeuvre” event heard from Maureen, who suffers from rheumatoid arthritis. She said:

“I use aids at home, they help to keep me independent. However, I didn’t realise I could get them through the local authority and it’s not clear what to do when you need support. It’s important that MPs learn about the problems people with arthritis have accessing aids and adaptations, so they can make sure the right help is available.”

Arthritic conditions can be a drain on medical resources, requiring regular medication, blood checks, bone scans, and occasional time off work to attend appointments. They are often lifelong conditions, and remissions or flare-ups may occur. As was said earlier, we need to be flexible in our places of work to host and accommodate the issues that affect these individuals.

Being able to work is often seen as beating the challenge that such a condition presents: a person taking control of their condition, rather than the condition being in control of them. It allows that person to have dignity and pride in their personal achievements, which I think we would all agree they are entitled to. Versus Arthritis includes in one of its publications a quote from Dr Carol Black, the expert adviser to the Government on health and work:

“The evidence is clear that most people with these disabling conditions want to work. Indeed, with the right support and working arrangements, usually with modest adjustments, they can do so and be valued employees” or continue to be valued employees in a company.

Let us endeavour to ensure that we do not unnecessarily lose talented and hard-working people from the workforce. The Equality Act 2010 requires an employer to make reasonable adjustments to support job applicants and enable an employee with a disability, or physical or mental health condition, to in effect wholly fulfil the duties of their post. I am aware that the Department for Work and Pensions has published guidance on employing disabled people with health conditions, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission has provided, or cited, examples.

Additionally, the Government’s Access to Work scheme affords an opportunity for funding extra assistance, bespoke to an individual’s specific needs, to help that person start work, stay in work, or move into self-employment. I will refer later in my speech, person start work, stay in work, or move into self-employment, to in effect wholly fulfil the duties of their post. I am aware that the Department for Work and Pensions has published guidance on employing disabled people with health conditions, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission has provided, or cited, examples.

It is certainly of concern that employees may not be aware that assessments under that scheme are free, and some people may not even be aware of the qualifying criteria. Although I am not overly well informed, I am aware of some of the available support and of the employer’s responsibility, as I have signed up to the DWP’s Disability Confident scheme. That scheme improves how employers attract, recruit and, importantly, retain disabled workers. I am pleased to note that some 5,000 businesses in the United Kingdom are already on board.

I employ a person with osteoarthritis, osteopenia and polymyalgia rheumatica. Reasonable adjustments feature in my constituency offices. New chairs were purchased to ensure appropriate lumbar support, and a document stand for copy typing was subsequently purchased at a low cost, for occasions on which stiffness restricts movement—a stiffness that, when untreated, my staff member describes eloquently as “at times, a living rigor”.

Other staff are observant, supportive, and undertake heavy weight-bearing tasks; in other words, they are collaborative and work as a team. That involves permission, sharing information about the condition, and—as I said—teamwork. My staff member also has fantastic support from her general practitioner and practice nurses.

People with arthritis and related conditions can often experience a greater than normal degree of tiredness, stiffness, or the side effects of medication for the condition. Indeed, certain necessary medication such as steroids may deplete the calcium levels in the body, putting people at further risk, in that they may potentially develop osteoporosis in addition to their existing condition. It is also important to note that symptoms will often fluctuate, with the sufferer having good days and bad days. I understand that even the weather may have an adverse effect on an individual, particularly temperature changes.

Arthritis and related conditions are the biggest cause of pain and disability in the United Kingdom, and result in over 30 million working days lost per annum. The British Society for Rheumatology highlights the need for multidisciplinary teams, and the considerable cost of rheumatoid arthritis to the UK economy. I am pleased that as part of the work, health and disability Green Paper, Ministers have explored ways to improve support for people with conditions such as arthritis, so that they can find and remain in work.

The ministerial foreword stated:

“This government is determined to build a country that works for everyone. A disability or health condition should not dictate the path a person is able to take in life—or in the workplace. What should count is a person’s talents and their determination and aspiration to succeed... We are bold in our ambition and we must also be bold in action. We must highlight, confront and challenge the attitudes, prejudices and misunderstanding.”

That message is still relevant today, and I hope this debate will reinvigorate discussion and capture the wider public’s attention.

The work, health and disability Green Paper proposed a 10-year plan to remove employment barriers for disabled people, and the Fit for Work scheme is being reformed to focus on what people can do, not what they cannot. I welcome the fact that the Access to Work scheme is being expanded to help more disabled people into work. However, at present there appears to be a lack of knowledge about the scheme and it is crucial that the
Government proactively promote that valuable opportunity. When Versus Arthritis conducted a survey between May 2018 and June 2018, it found that of those who responded, 59% had never even heard of the Access to Work scheme. A proactive promotion of the scheme would, I am certain, assist the Government in meeting their ambitious and commendable aim of having 1 million more disabled people in employment by 2027.

There is a degree of comfort in knowing that since 2013, some 600,000 disabled people have moved into employment. We must build on that with a sense of urgency. In addition, according to Versus Arthritis, it has been discovered that many of the people who qualify for assistance from the Government’s Access to Work scheme face problems with how it is operated. Administration processes can on occasion be cumbersome, and it may be that the Government could carry out a review to ensure that things are more user-friendly. I am sure the Minister will take note of that. That is a concern with a number of issues with the DWP.

One of my constituents felt that the DWP did not fully comprehend the consequences of her osteoporosis when asking her to attend a course, particularly as she relied on others for transport. I for one appreciate that the DWP has been increasing its advisers, including its community partners, small employer advisers, disability employment advisers and work coaches, as well as providing training for them. It may be that that needs to be further enhanced to provide greater awareness among some of the DWP’s frontline staff of the various arthritic and associated conditions and to adequately address the needs of service users. I do not say that with any intention to be unkind to those staff, because they do a wonderful job on our behalf on a daily basis.

Hugh Gaffney: The hon. Gentleman is doing a great job. We are talking about helping people, but can we not also help health and safety in the workplace by working with young workers to prevent arthritis later in life?

Bill Grant: I am not a medical expert—arthritis may or may not be related to the workplace—but where issues can be identified, such as repetitive work that might affect the musculoskeletal system of an individual, we can change it. We can automate it without losing the job, but we need to be conscious of what staff are subject to through 10, 20 or maybe 30 years of work. I agree with the hon. Gentleman: if those issues can be identified, they should be removed and we should mitigate the risks as best we can. Where possible, we should assist employers in doing so.

Spending on the Access to Work scheme has increased by 8% in recent times, supporting more than 25,000 people. Around £54 billion per annum is spent on benefits to support people with disabilities, equating to some 6% of all Government spending. Nevertheless, I make a plea to the Treasury to consider further increasing the allocation of funding for the scheme and introducing incentives to encourage employers to consider health and wellbeing initiatives to assist those with arthritic conditions. The benefits of physiotherapy have been recognised. In Scotland, the public may self-refer, but that may not be the case throughout the whole United Kingdom.

Finally, there is a problem that action does not always follow post-assessment recommendations. Will the Government consider what they can do to address any negative attitudes on the part of employers or managers, whether that be by further legislative provision or some other means? By sharing and encouraging best practice and putting the right support in place, we can make it easier for people with arthritis who want to work, helping to achieve the Government’s laudable ambition of getting 1 million disabled people into work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. I have six Members wanting to catch my eye, so I propose a four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.45 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on securing this debate and on his excellent and informative speech. Several constituents requested that I attend this debate, but I was particularly encouraged to be here by Danielle Swinney. Danielle suffers badly with ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammatory form of arthritis that causes the vertebrae in the spine to fuse. Despite being in constant crippling pain, Danielle works full-time in a pressurised job as an accountant.

Danielle told me how her condition affects her. It differs from day to day, but every day she sets her alarm for 4 am, two hours before she needs to get up, because her joints and back are so stiff that she has trouble moving first thing in the morning. It takes her an hour to get to work. Once she is there, she works from 8 am until 4.30 pm, and some days even longer. None of that helps with the symptomatic chronic fatigue she experiences, like so many others with arthritis. Danielle wants to work, however, and like everyone she needs to work, but she says that some days are so hard that even just to put on her own socks and shoes is a problem.

Danielle is just 25 years old. I salute her for her determination, her professionalism in her work and her frankness in talking about her condition. On her behalf, I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government do more to make employers aware of the effects of arthritis and to ensure that courageous people such as Danielle, who puts many of us to shame, can get into and be supported to remain in work. People with arthritis do not want their condition to keep them out of employment, and we owe it to them to make sure it does not.

4.47 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on securing this debate and on his outstanding speech, which showed his passion and enthusiasm for this topic. I listened carefully, and I do not think he declared an interest at the start, so the spring in his step that we see from him every day around Westminster is perfectly natural and his interest in this debate comes not from any self-interest, but is for his
constituents, who have rightly raised the issue. It was good to hear what he has done in his office to accommodate a member of staff.

I want to briefly give some figures from my constituency of Moray. Nationally, 63% of people of working age who have arthritis are in work. When we look at the figures more closely, in Moray, people over 45 with osteoarthritis of the hip number 4,757. There are 7,848 people over 45 with osteoarthritis of the knee. There are 653 people with rheumatoid arthritis. There are 15,526 people in Moray with back pain. Had it not been for my hon. Friend’s debate today, I would not have known that such a large number of people within my community suffer day in, day out with this condition.

We heard from the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) about a young person who lives with arthritis. It is testament to them that much of the time when we see them in our communities, they put on a very brave face. They work hard to live with their condition while in excruciating pain. This debate has shown that there is support for them, and we have to do all we can to encourage them to take up that offer of support, but we should also realise how many of those we work with day in, day out in our communities suffer from arthritis.

Arthritis and related conditions are the biggest cause of pain and disability in the United Kingdom, and account for 28.2 million working days lost each year. Nearly half of all work-related illnesses in Scotland are related to arthritis and joint pain, so it is a considerable issue, both in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and something that we really need to tackle.

I welcome the presence of the Minister, who I am sure will speak about the Access to Work scheme. It is an excellent scheme that we should promote, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock said, we need to promote it because there is not enough awareness of its benefits. As he said, between May and June 2018 Versus Arthritis surveyed 15,082 people with arthritis and related conditions. Those people live with it, day in, day out, and are acutely aware of the need for assistance and support. Yet almost 60%—59%—had never heard of the scheme, so the people we are trying to target are unaware of a scheme that is designed to help them.

Worryingly—I would appreciate the Minister’s response to this, if he is aware of why it has happened—the number of people with arthritis who benefit from the scheme has fallen each year.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson) indicated dissent.

Douglas Ross: That was from a briefing that I received ahead of the debate. If the Minister does not believe that to be the case, it would be useful to clarify that on the record. Certainly the campaign group supporting the debate and briefing MPs says that it has fallen, year on year, over the last five years. I welcome any update from the Minister on that.

I welcome the debate, which is an opportunity for us all to raise awareness of this crippling condition, to support those in our communities who live with arthritis, and to try to get them better services to allow them to work. They all want to be part of the community, and part of the working community. We can support them as a Government and as MPs. Today, because of my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, we have done that.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on securing the debate, which is of great interest to me, both in a professional capacity as a former employment lawyer, and in a personal capacity as the husband of a fibromyalgia sufferer. I have seen at first hand the impact that invisible conditions such as arthritis and related conditions can have on an individual’s daily life. We do not talk about it enough, because the hardest symptoms for any of us to understand are those that we cannot see. Symptoms such as fatigue and pain, which are common in arthritis and related conditions, can be invisible to the outside world but no less debilitating for that.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): As a former physiotherapist, I share my hon. Friend’s interest in this important subject. Anna Lockey, a young woman in my constituency, has psoriatic arthritis. She is planning on going back to work following her maternity leave in September. She is one of many who want to work and contribute to the wider economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that utilising the Access to Work scheme and the aids and adaptations, which are often inexpensive, can be really helpful?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and welcome her to this place. She will clearly have a great deal of professional expertise to bring to bear. I will talk a little about some of the barriers that people with such conditions face in getting back to work. It is an important point, and central to the debate.

In my constituency, it is estimated that more than 16,000 people live with back pain, and that more than 4,000 and 8,000 people live with osteoarthritis of the hip and knee respectively. Versus Arthritis tells us that 17.8 million people live with arthritis or a related condition across the country, about half of whom live with pain every day. That is a staggering number of people coping with that in their everyday lives. Just because we cannot see their pain, it should not be ignored or written off as part of the ageing process. That can negatively affect the support that they receive.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many arthritic conditions can fluctuate in severity, leaving people unsure how well they will be able to cope from day to day. That can make it difficult to hold down a regular job, but equally it should not be used as cover for discrimination. Many people with arthritis want to work if the right support is in place. As has been touched on, that help is available through the Access to Work scheme. However, there are concerns that the scheme is not working as well as it should.

Not enough people who would benefit from the scheme are aware of it. We know that 60% of people surveyed by Versus Arthritis had never heard of the Access to Work scheme or were unaware of what kind of help it could provide, and nearly 70% had never
accessed support through the scheme. Clearly, there is a lot more to be done to promote it. In a debate on disabled people and economic growth last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) made the point that the scheme is probably one of our best kept secrets. When we hear the figures about the lack of awareness, it is hard to disagree.

With the Government’s own figures showing that Access to Work was approved for only 25,000 people in 2016-17, it is clear just how much room we have to make up. The scheme can provide invaluable practical and financial support to meet the needs of disabled people, but only if it is actually accessed. If the Government are serious about meeting their aim of getting 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027, the scheme must be better publicised and actually work for its users.

A quarter of those who have applied for support from the scheme did not receive all the support that was asked for or that was recommended by their assessor. A tenth of respondents reported that they did not receive any support at all after applying to the scheme. Has the Minister looked at those alarming figures, and has there been any kind of research on why that is the case?

As we know, the major arthritis charities are calling for the Government to commission research on the meaning of “reasonable adjustments”, and for support to be put in place to help people who challenge employers who do not act on Access to Work recommendations. Employers are obliged to make reasonable adjustments, but if someone is in work and not in a trade union, who will help to argue for them? If someone is applying for a job, just how easy is it to introduce that issue at a job interview? If an employer still refuses to make adjustments, just how realistic is it to expect people to take their employer to tribunal, especially without support, and what comfort do they have that putting their head above the parapet will not rebound on them?

Do not forget that the coalition Government introduced employment tribunal fees, putting another hurdle in the way of those who seek justice. I make that point because I witnessed at first hand, through the life of my late mother-in-law, Joyce Ferguson, what such encumbrance the condition is to people trying to lead a normal life. I saw the benefit of the aids and adapters available to people with such conditions, and I hope that more people will have the opportunity to take advantage of what is available, such as grab rails, electric tin openers and lever taps.

We should take some satisfaction from the fact that, since 2013, 930,000 disabled people have been able to return to work. It is a noble goal that another 1 million people who suffer from disability should return to work by 2027. As has been mentioned, only 63% of working-age adults with any kind of condition affecting muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and joints work, compared with 81% of the overall population with no health condition, so the Government must do everything that they can to continue helping those with such conditions back to work. Given that 17.8 million people suffer from such conditions, half of whom live with pain every day, this subject should concentrate our minds.

The motivation for helping people back to work is not just about statistics. In fact, it should be a long way from them. Work is ennobling. It can bring independence and financial security to someone’s life. It can also lead to social interaction and a more fulfilling life, creating opportunities to develop skills and so on. Allowing people, regardless of their background, the opportunity to work and reap the benefits that work brings should motivate us to give even more support to those with conditions such as arthritis and help them into work.

We must recognise that there are many different types of arthritis, which affect individuals differently, and some are more severe than others. The pain experienced is constant with some forms and less so with others. It is important that the Government continue to recognise that those differences exist and that we should not try to apply a one-size-fits-all approach. We should take that variance into account when we design policies to encourage those who suffer from arthritis to come back into work.

Rheumatoid arthritis is one of the forms in which the pain can vary. One day, an individual may be considered fit to work, but the next day they will struggle to get out of bed. Some will argue that those who suffer from rheumatoid arthritis should work on the days when their pain is relatively lower, but that is unrealistic; flare-ups are unexpected and can occur at any moment. The Government must ask themselves why any employer would hire a worker who cannot guarantee that they are fit enough to go to work the next day. The Government need to intervene.

I ask the Minister to answer some questions. Will the fit for work forms be adjusted to make it easier for people to express the fact that they suffer from flare-ups? What role can GPs and rheumatologists play in giving a correct and detailed medical update about the health of a person? Does the Minister agree that both of those things would not only give taxpayers greater value for money but make those who suffer from medical conditions that affect their ability to work feel that they are being encouraged, treated on a more human basis and welcomed by a Government who are intent on serving their needs?
Approximately 10 million people in the UK live with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions. Only 60% of working-age people with persistent musculoskeletal conditions are in work, and those people account for a fifth of all working days lost through ill health in the UK. According to the latest figures that I have seen, approximately 30.6 million working days were lost to absence in 2013 because of those and similar conditions. There are 44,000 people who live with rheumatoid arthritis in Scotland, and they often suffer considerable pain.

If we are to halve the disability employment gap, it is important to stem the flow of disabled people leaving employment because of discrimination or lack of support. People with arthritis want to work, and the majority can, so I echo the calls for greater promotion of the Access to Work scheme among employers and employees who could benefit. The task before us is to support those who live with these conditions into work or support sustained employment for them. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions system is fully cognisant of the fact that some people with these conditions simply are not able to work. That is our task, and I hope that the Minister will fully echo and endorse those goals today.

We know that the challenges posed by these conditions are significant, since those who live with them are less likely to be employed than those in good health and are more likely to retire early. That also has implications for the wider economy. The combined direct and indirect cost to the UK economy of osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis is estimated to be about £21.6 billion. In addition, there is a loss to those who are affected by those conditions. People with arthritis want to work, and the majority can, so I echo the calls for greater promotion of the Access to Work scheme among employers and employees who could benefit. The task before us is to support those who live with these conditions into work or support sustained employment for them. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions system is fully cognisant of the fact that some people with these conditions simply are not able to work. That is our task, and I hope that the Minister will fully echo and endorse those goals today.

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Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on securing this debate, on speaking from personal experience and on advocating for his constituents. He rightly highlighted that in many ways, the simple solution for those who want to remain in work is to broaden awareness of the Access to Work scheme. I reiterate that point, which has been highlighted by all hon. Members today, including the hon. Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for Moray (Douglas Ross), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

Many hon. Members have highlighted the fact that arthritis is an invisible illness with a profound effect on many people’s lives. When people think of arthritis, the stereotype is often of someone in their later years, but many people are now being diagnosed in their 20s and 30s; the hon. Member for North Tyneside mentioned her constituent Danielle, who is 25.

As well as highlighting the Access to Work scheme, it is essential to address the fact that there is too often a stigma around declaring an illness, especially at a younger age. Too many people, especially those who are in insecure or part-time work, do not declare their health issues or seek workplace adaptations. It is crucial for support to be distributed not just to large employers, but to small and medium-sized enterprises. Too many people in insecure work are afraid to highlight their health condition, but it is essential that they get the support that they need.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran highlighted the statistics for Scotland. The majority of people can and do want to work. As the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock highlighted, we want to support people into work. We want to make it possible, particularly for young people who suffer from arthritis, to remain in work. Many who are diagnosed will continue to work, and we rely on employers to offer the flexibility, understanding and the adaptations that people require.

Employers who do not support their staff are breaking the law. According to the Equality Act 2010, employers must make reasonable adjustments. Many people, however, may not tell their employer. Ensuring that disabled people can overcome this significant disadvantage relies on a workplace culture change, and attitudes to disability in the workplace changing.

The UK Government can play a role, including through the Access to Work programme. I urge the Minister to promote the scheme more and to enhance the benefits, both for the employer and for employees, specifically for people with arthritis, fibromyalgia and other long-term conditions. The Government could also undertake work to clarify the meaning of “reasonable adjustments”, so that it is clear what employers should provide for those who may suffer from such a condition, and consider what steps they can take to ensure that employers comply with the 2010 Act and carry out the recommendations of the Access to Work scheme.

In closing, I thank my senior caseworker, Rhona. She is probably one of the hardest working people I know. Despite having arthritis, she has turned her experience and her disability into a positive. She is one of the most empathetic, uplifting and passionate staff members that I could ask for and has provided an invaluable service to so many of my constituents—I am indebted to her. I am so grateful. She is one of many people who have a massive contribution to make, who want to manage their condition and who want to remain in the workplace. I call on the Minister to improve the focus to ensure that today’s figures are drastically improved, and to help support people with arthritis to work for as long as they can and as long as they want to.

5.12 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) for securing such a vital debate, which has been informed by a number of charities, which work so hard for the benefit of people with disabilities and those who suffer with arthritis and related conditions.

As we have heard through the very powerful contributions from the 13 Members present from across the House, living with the condition can be debilitating and have a negative impact on quality of life. Arthritis and related conditions are the biggest cause of pain and disability in the UK. As a result, 28.2 million working days are lost annually. Every year, one in five people—20% of the UK population—consults a GP about musculoskeletal problems. More than half of the 17.8 million people in the UK with arthritis and related conditions live with pain every single day. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) highlighted that with the stark case of Danielle. Her condition has a huge impact on her life, slowly intrudes on everyday life, and affects her ability to work, to sustain work and to live independently.

Arthritis can also have a huge impact on an individual’s mental health, as hon. Members have highlighted. Living with a painful condition can lead to depression and anxiety, as well as placing limits on a person’s ability to keep active and to stay connected within communities and society.

We should pay particular attention to the disturbing fact that people in the most deprived areas of the UK are much more likely to report arthritis or back pain than people in equivalent age groups who live in less deprived areas. Some 40% of men and 44% of women in the poorest households report chronic pain, compared with 24% of men and 30% of women in more affluent households. There is a real social class and inequality issue here.

Versus Arthritis, the charity whose excellent work is dedicated to changing the lives of people who live with arthritis and related conditions, estimates that 10% of the UK population aged over 45 suffer with osteoarthritis of the hip, 17% suffer with back pain and 18% suffer with osteoarthritis of the knee. Many Members have highlighted the higher prevalence in their constituencies, which is also the case in mine.

This Government’s apparent antipathy and lack of regard for those who suffer with arthritis and related illnesses has been demonstrated in their limited approach to the promotion of the Access to Work scheme, which has been highlighted by Members across the House.
The charity Leonard Cheshire has argued that there has been no significant extension of the programme over the last nine years.

Justin Tomlinson indicated dissent.

Mike Amesbury: The Minister shakes his head, but that is from the Government’s own figures.

Will the Minister tell the House what plans are in place to help people with musculoskeletal conditions in the workplace? Arthritis sufferers who have applied to the Government’s Access to Work scheme said they have faced problems with how the scheme operates. In a survey of people with arthritis and related conditions carried out by Versus Arthritis in 2018, 59% had never heard of the Access to Work scheme, with many more unaware of what help was available. It is almost the best kept secret, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said.

Some 25% of respondents said they did not receive all the support that was asked for, or that had been recommended by the Access to Work adviser, with a further 10% saying they did not receive any support whatsoever after applying. Will the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to ensure that recommendations made by the Access to Work scheme are enacted?

The Equality Act 2010 placed a legal responsibility on employers to provide reasonable adjustments to support people with a disability in the workplace, so that they would not be disadvantaged. However, the Equality Act does not define what those reasonable adjustments are. As a result, it can be difficult for someone with arthritis to know exactly what their employer should be doing to help them, especially if they are not unionised, as was pointed out. Will the Minister tell the House whether the Government plan to undertake work to clarify the meaning of “reasonable adjustments”? Would he agree to work with Versus Arthritis on that?

One in eight of the working-age population has a musculoskeletal problem, but only 63% of that group are in work, compared with 81% of people with no health condition. What steps are the Government taking to close the disability employment gap for people with arthritis and related illnesses?

The Government have pledged to see 1 million more people with disabilities and long-term health conditions in work by 2027—just 100,000 people per year. Curiously, the Office for National Statistics reports that the increased number of disabled people in work has not been matched by a reduction in the number of disabled people who are out of work. We are now two years into the Government’s 10-year strategy for supporting disabled people into work. However, the National Audit Office reports that they have yet to develop a full implementation plan to achieve their goal.

Through whatever kaleidoscope of smoke and mirrors we look when measuring our employment figures, facts are facts: the disability employment gap remains stubbornly at 30% and this Government are failing to get a grip on that dismal statistic. I ask the Minister to listen to the concerns raised by all the Members here today and to commit to addressing and rectifying the unacceptable existing inequality of support for those who suffer with arthritis.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I pay tribute to all the speakers—perhaps with the exception of the last one—for their very proactive and constructive speeches on this incredibly important subject. It reflects well on the brilliant opening speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who demonstrated a real passion, knowledge and interest in this area, that it was picked up and reflected in each and every speech. People who have listened to the debate will be encouraged at the great level of interest—it is not as if nothing else is happening in Parliament today. It is brilliant that this issue has captured so much interest.

My hon. Friend was spot on when he quoted Dame Carol Black, who said:

“The evidence is clear that most people with these disabling conditions want to work. Indeed, with the right support and working arrangements, usually with modest adjustments, they can do so and be valued employees.”

He made the powerful point that there is a misconception that this impacts only on older people. In fact, it can affect people throughout their lives. One in six people will develop a disability or long-term health condition, and many of them will be of working age. This is a common challenge and barrier that people need to overcome. I welcome the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—with her expertise in this area, I am sure that she will be a valuable addition to Parliament.

Despite the previous, pre-written speech, the reality of the disability stats is that there are now 947,000 more disabled people in work in the past five years. We have taken disability employment from 44.2% to 51.7%, which is a record high. For the first time, more disabled people are in work than not. However, it is not enough. We are an ambitious Government, and we set out two years ago our ambition for a further 1 million disabled people to be in work. In those first two years, over 400,000 more disabled people are in work. We are ahead of schedule, but it is still not enough.

We will continue to do everything we can to empower businesses to have the confidence to tackle the barriers and take advantage of the huge amount of talent that is all too often overlooked. I do not just preach as a Minister; I say that as an employer. Before I became an MP, my own business benefited from employing disabled people and having the confidence to make small changes. Actually, I benefited. I have been in a series of stakeholder meetings and events today, and everyone was united in saying we have to ensure it works for everyone.

The majority of today’s speeches focused on Access to Work, and I recognise that it is right to challenge the scheme. However, we must recognise that 33,800 people were helped last year—up 13%, and a record high. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) asked whether funding had been increased or decreased in this area. We do not record that specifically, but people who listed conditions that relate to the arms and hands, legs, feet or back and neck—we would expect those to be covered predominantly in this area—as their primary medical condition accounted for about 10% of our spend, which was up 2% on last year.
I recognise hon. Members’ broad point that more people need to benefit from the Access to Work scheme, especially in this area—particularly as technology plays an increasing part in removing barriers and creating opportunities, which I have seen on visits. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) discussed her caseworker and explained how she is benefiting from small changes that can be replicated right across the board.

The key is improving the awareness of Access to Work. We are looking at improving awareness in jobcentres, so that in the initial conversation we take into account everybody’s unique opportunities and challenges, particularly on health, and that it is ingrained in all our frontline staff that this is an option to help unlock barriers. That goes right to the core of the principle of the joint work and health unit. I had a meeting about that earlier, and we recognise just how important it is. We need to work more closely with stakeholders to promote this to their members as something that can be utilised. We should work with GPs and health professionals to ensure that they are aware of the opportunity.

On fit notes, GPs can highlight the fact that there are fluctuating health conditions that can limit the amount of work someone can do. I understand the point that was made, and we are working with medical professionals to look at what more can be done in that area. We need to look at our health and work providers and ensure they include it—it should be embedded in their options. Through the Disability Confident scheme, we are now at 12,000 businesses—a record high. We have ambitions to increase that rapidly and are looking at putting additional requirements on the highest level of Disability Confident. We should perhaps look at signposting from general benefits. If we have identified people with health conditions through disability benefits, we could perhaps signpost people for additional local support. It is not something that they must have, but providing such information could be helpful for people.

There is one area where I think we can make a real difference. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made a really good point: how can we be sure that businesses have an understanding? For many, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, this is not necessarily a common occurrence, and they like to have confidence. There is an opportunity through the Health and Safety Executive, which is a pretty good body. There is an opportunity through Access to Work someone can do. I understand the point that was made, and we are working with medical professionals to look at what more can be done in that area. We need to look at our health and work providers and ensure they include it—it should be embedded in their options. Through the Disability Confident scheme, we are now at 12,000 businesses—a record high. We have ambitions to increase that rapidly and are looking at putting additional requirements on the highest level of Disability Confident. We should perhaps look at signposting from general benefits. If we have identified people with health conditions through disability benefits, we could perhaps signpost people for additional local support. It is not something that they must have, but providing such information could be helpful for people.

I was genuinely impressed by how proactive and constructive the speeches we have heard were. There is a real cross-party commitment to get this right—it is such an important issue. Not everybody is looking for a full-time job or career. I have met young disabled people for whom simply being able to do one hour is a life-changing opportunity. Wherever there is a barrier, we as a Government are absolutely committed to remove it. We want businesses to have the confidence to take advantage of the huge amount of talent that I am afraid, is all too often overlooked. We are heading in the right direction, but we are ambitious to do more. I thank each and every hon. Member for what they are doing to highlight all the opportunities that people can take advantage of.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 May 2019

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Leaving the EU: Extension Period Negotiations

9.30 am  

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered negotiations on the UK leaving the EU during the EU extension period.

Although I have contributed to many Westminster Hall debates, it is an honour to lead my first one this morning and to do so under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

In my maiden speech nearly two years ago, I spoke of the “delicate gift” that is our “parliamentary democracy”, which is “the sum of the toil” and “sacrifice...that generations before us have made”. I also said that this “dynamic system” has worked on “trust”, with each cohort of parliamentarians vowing to “fine-tune” and reform our laws and institutions “to reflect the needs and desires of the citizens they represent.”

“...—[Official Report, 6 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1392.]

I made my own vow two years ago, standing on a manifesto to leave the single market and customs union, in an election at which nearly 85% of votes went to parties promising to fulfil the referendum result. I was elected to a House that had already triggered the two-year countdown to our departure from the EU, and I took leadership from a Cabinet that repeated in one voice that no deal was better than a bad deal.

On the eve of European elections, we should all reflect with regret on the fact that this generation of parliamentarians is now on the cusp of losing the trust that is so fundamental to democratic legitimacy. Could there be a more poignant symbol of that devastating loss than the scaffolded shroud that this mother of Parliaments now wears? How disappointing to those who flock to this place in admiration that they find not a confident institution but one where Big Ben—the icon of our democracy—is silent, its clock face peeping on to a Parliament that is being incrementally fortified against rising anger from the streets.

I do not wish to downplay the magnitude of the decision to leave the EU or the complexity of extracting ourselves from the EU some 40 years after entry. However, it should have been our role as parliamentarians to address and manage those complexities. Instead, it is an indictment of this place that, three years on, the question of whether we shall leave the EU at all is not even a settled one. There remains no clear vision of our future relationship with the EU or of our new role in the world to underpin Government strategy. In the absence of that vision, we have become increasingly desperate just to deliver the word Brexit, even if an unholy fudge to obtain our withdrawal binds us into the very systems that the electorate rejected while denying our voice within them.

I sought this debate not to argue about the merits or otherwise of leaving the EU, because that decision has been made, nor to pick over the bones of a withdrawal agreement that has thrice been rejected. Instead, I want us to take stock, ask ourselves how we got here and then—most importantly—ask how we can make use of the period until 31 October to deliver on the referendum and gear our country to its new future.

There are many and varied reasons why people voted to leave, but one of the turning points for me as a floating voter was the conclusion of the attempted renegotiation of our membership. In my opinion, the preference of many swing voters would have been to stay in the EU and reform it from within. However, the renegotiation was the point at which it became clear that British influence, and the threat of the third largest member of the EU walking away from it, was going to be an insufficient driver in making the EU more dynamic and accountable. Instead, the eurozone members were likely to require further political integration, creating a deeper divide with non-eurozone nations and an even more pronounced loss of influence for our nation when it comes to addressing the concerns of our own citizens.

Since then, we have spent three years effectively trying to carve out a bespoke association agreement with the EU, with Chequers being the Prime Minister’s attempt to obtain a half-in, half-out option. The EU dubbed that cherry-picking, and in reading the UK’s political dynamic, it has banked our offers of cash and a comprehensive security partnership, while holding us to a backstop in Northern Ireland that in the next stage of talks will ultimately pull us into a customs union and large parts of the single market. If it does not do that, it risks splitting our country.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am listening with great interest to the hon. Lady’s comments. She does not want a Northern Ireland backstop. Could she tell us her proposal to respect the Good Friday agreement if we leave the customs union and the single market? Does she accept that the Government’s own view is that such a solution does not yet exist?

Julia Lopez: I will go on later in my speech to talk about some of the alternative arrangements that are already being worked up. There is a group within Government that actually has the resources now to deal with that issue, and the EU is also looking at alternative arrangements. I think that the question now becomes this: do we make those alternative arrangements now, or after we have signed a withdrawal agreement that is effectively an international treaty that will bind us into a number of things that are not in our country’s interest?

Tied into EU rules on goods, we will find that we have little leverage in negotiating access for our critical services, either with the EU or with new trading partners. However, there is absolutely no point in directing our frustration over this substandard withdrawal agreement at the EU. We have been too readily hoisted by the petard of an article 50 process that British diplomats designed: this poor outcome has come about through our complicity in its sequencing and design.
However, the withdrawal agreement has been neither signed nor ratified, so there remains a chance for us to pause and read the writing that the British public—if not Britain’s politicians—have seen on the wall for some time, namely that if we go ahead with this agreement, we will give up our ability to secure an attractive future relationship with the EU and instead will find ourselves in an unsustainable, asymmetric relationship with the EU, which will arguably leave us with less say over the rules and regulations that govern us than we have now. The transition period will only extend political uncertainty, and therefore economic uncertainty, because we do not know to what we are transitioning. That will throw a blanket over an economy that desperately wants a sense of direction. Whatever Bill now comes before us in Parliament will not change what has been negotiated in Brussels; we must not waste the next four months attaching funereal adornments to a thoroughly dead horse.

The public also know that the EU is unlikely to reform any time soon because the existing system benefits its most influential members. The EU will not draw up, at least in these current negotiations, a bespoke relationship with the UK, because it has decided that it values the integrity of the single market over frictionless trade with us, and it has also determined—quite correctly—that it has the leverage to reject our overtures regarding special treatment.

Parliament has so far done its job in judging this agreement to be against our interests. However, it has not accepted the consequences of that judgment. Despite attempts by parliamentarians to suggest practical amendments, the Prime Minister and the EU have made it quite clear that no other withdrawal agreement is available. They have also made it clear, through the sequencing of talks, that there can be no negotiations about the future relationship, beyond the broad-brush political declaration, until we have formally left. To put it another way, we will only be permitted to move to stage 2 once we have tied our hands behind our backs in stage 1.

I say with deep regret that we are left to face an unavoidable question: will we leave without a formal withdrawal agreement, with the economic challenges that presents, or will we vote to revoke article 50, and face the democratic consequences of that action? If parliamentarians wish to revoke article 50, let them vote for it and explain to their electorates why they now seek to overturn the inexorable logic of what they themselves put into law. Alternatively, we must face leaving without a withdrawal agreement and use the time before we leave to do our damnedest to make that work, while leaving the door firmly open for discussions with the EU on an alternative withdrawal agreement. Such an outcome, however, will require more than cosmetic preparation and jingoistic mantras about WTO terms. It will need major policy prescriptions, strong Government direction and co-ordination, transparency about the state of our preparedness and potentially even a fresh mandate if Parliament contrives to frustrate this process.

I am grateful to have the Minister for no deal here this morning so that he can set out with honesty and clarity the challenges that we would face in delivery, and how we can best mitigate them, while maximising the leverage of any advantages that this freedom might provide.

The urgent priority for Government in such a scenario would be to address the absence of an underpinning philosophy about Britain’s place in the world. My concern at this absence is reflected in Friday’s National Audit Office report on future trading policy, which effectively said that the UK will not get what it wants if it does not know what it wants.

The Brexit vote has often been misinterpreted as a misty-eyed reflex to return us to Britain past, but I see it instead as a judgment about the future—about where the world is going and whether the trajectory of the EU puts us in the right place to tackle the new challenges ahead. We are moving into an era of substantial regional trading blocs, in the form of China, the US and the EU. However, the UK has ultimately been unable to reconcile itself to Guy Verhofstadt’s vision, which he expressed this week, of an EU empire as the best way to flourish in this era, because we believe that the nation state still has fundamental relevance in maintaining the social and economic pact between Government and citizens that safeguards our cohesion.

Leaving the EU must not mean simply jumping into the arms of an alternative bloc. We must set ourselves up as a dynamic, open trading nation like Australia, Singapore and Canada, with strong links to all major powers and co-operation with the most forward-thinking, mid-tier nations on global standards for new technologies and data, the rule of law, security, and constantly evolving free trade agreements that break new ground on environmental stewardship, sustainable development and people-to-people exchange. Globally, we can be a bridge, a mediator and a thought leader; domestically, we can be a place of safety, liberty, creativity and prosperity, comfortable with the value of our nationhood and proud of our collective, modern identity.

Secondly, we need to move with speed—but not haste—in drawing up a new independent trading policy, ensuring that we avoid entering substandard agreements out of political imperative. We need to quickly establish whether the EU is genuinely interested in rapidly striking a comprehensive FTA along Canada lines, or whether it would seek to drag that process out to stifle talks with other nations. As things stand, it has been difficult for us to roll over existing FTAs, for example, because third countries want to see the shape of the future UK-EU trading relationship: how much flexibility over our own rules are we going to have, and how much access to the EU market.

Before making that approach to the EU, we have to undertake a hard-nosed assessment of our negotiating leverage, be it money, access to goods and financial markets, or co-operation on research and security. We must then answer broad strategic questions such as whether we have the capacity to attempt parallel negotiations with other countries, and whether to roll the Department for Exiting the European Union into the Department for International Trade so that the Government speak with a consistent voice. Immediately after tomorrow’s elections, we will require swift diplomatic analysis of how the new make-up of the European Parliament and Commission has changed the European power dynamic, and the extent to which that alters the landscape of future talks.

Thirdly, we need to accept that future access to the EU market will not be as good as our current arrangements, or is unlikely to be. Trading on WTO terms is not a
cure-all, otherwise Governments would never seek to improve those terms via FTAs. We need urgently to identify which businesses will be most affected by that change—whether they need to adapt or mitigate its impact—and provide a bold programme of tax cuts, greater regulatory freedoms that can drive competitiveness, or specific short-term support packages from the state. I would be grateful if the Minister explained what cross-departmental work has already been done in this area.

There also needs to be an analysis of long-term impacts. In financial services, for instance, the EU will want to avoid immediate shocks to its own institutions, but will then try to create a medium to long-term drag for firms so that they base themselves in the single market. What is our strategy to provide an even more compelling pull for services firms to retain, or move, bases here? How ready is our trade remedies regime, and are we really prepared for dealing with our own defensive producer interests, which we have hitherto hidden behind the EU to arbitrate?

Fourthly, Northern Ireland will require intensive and sustained focus. All parties, including the EU and Ireland itself, have agreed that there cannot be a hard border, so political impetus and financial resourcing need to be given to the alternative arrangements working group on how existing techniques—not new technologies—to check and clear goods away from the border can be implemented. I would appreciate the Minister’s update on that work, as well as on the state of preparedness at Dover and other major ports; on progress in rolling out authorised economic operator and trusted trader schemes; and on HMRC support for businesses dealing with new paperwork requirements.

If we are to take a tighter approach to immigration from the EU, we will need a major boost to our domestic skills agenda, including the adequate resourcing of our vocational education and college system; intensive investment in recruitment to the health and social care sectors; and incentivisation of businesses to train UK workers. What discussions has the Minister had about the preparedness of the labour market to tackle any impact of no deal?

To make this policy effort work, we will need to rally businesses, citizens and the civil service. Enough of the attacks on one another. Civil servants are just that: dedicated, professional citizens with a desire to serve. However, they cannot compensate for an absence of political direction. Once that has been provided, we must trust them to deliver.

That change of attitude must also translate to our dealings with the EU. Enough of the constant wartime references, and of speeches made in the UK that we think are not being heard in Brussels. The EU is not an enemy, but an organisation comprised of treasured partners; we need a reciprocation of that attitude, while reassuring the EU that it should not fear contagion. For Brits, our membership of the EU has always been more transactional, because as an island nation our borders are comparatively well defined. A desire for political stability, even if at times it comes at the price of economies, takes precedence for many continental European nations.

This new era therefore allows for a renewal of our relationship that will let each party move in a trajectory with which it is more comfortable. That relationship will require the establishment of fresh diplomatic frameworks for dialogue on issues of shared importance, and I would be grateful if the Minister explained what discussions he has had with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about how we are gearing up our presence across the continent. The National Audit Office has also identified that DIT is under-resourced for the new relationships we wish to build. Can the Minister advise us on how quickly we might step up our presence in those countries with which we wish to deepen trading ties?

There are many other areas of no-deal preparations that require intensive focus. However, as other hon. Members wish to contribute, I will conclude by raising a bizarrely under-discussed aspect of Brexit that goes to the heart of this nation’s political malaise. Representative democracy works by citizens effectively subcontracting political decision making to a class of people in a way that gives those citizens the freedom to live their lives and prosper. They then endorse a framework and strategic direction for those decisions via a general election, or—in the case of Brexit—a referendum. In many ways, contempt for the political class has grown over these past few years in line with politicians’ avoidance of the kinds of decisions that they are explicitly elected to make, and their insistence on blaming institutions like the EU for failings.

 Brexit was a signal to this place that the public want us to make more of our own decisions and then be accountable for them, but it is astonishing how few parliamentarians welcome the raft of powers that will soon make its way across the channel. We have not even begun to contemplate what that restoration of powers will mean for Parliament, and how it can be used to reinvigorate our pact with the electorate. In that vein, I would be grateful if the Minister could tell me what urgent thought is being given to rebalancing with the legislature the power that has been transferred to the Executive from Brussels via Henry VIII clauses in this period as a means of managing short-term Brexit challenges. Such power vested in Government may seem expedient now, but will rapidly seem less attractive under a Corbyn Government.

I fear that for some time, our political class has harboured a simultaneous inferiority and superiority complex about this nation’s abilities. One group of politicians consistently talks down our country’s inherent strength and resilience, while another parrots slogans of exceptionalism that diminish the practical challenges ahead. The public believe in this nation’s future beyond the EU, but expect us to be clear-eyed in its delivery. The Prime Minister has indicated that she will not take us forward in such an endgame. Should her withdrawal agreement fail again, so the duty will fall upon any leadership contender to set out with resolve, and in forensic detail, their response to some of the issues I have highlighted. In doing so, I hope they will place service to nation, rather than personal ambition, at the heart of their task.

Regarding the latest EU extension period, EU President Donald Tusk warned “do not waste this time”, but it is not his wrath about which we should be worried. If on the road to 31 October, we do not employ the lessons we have learned over these past three years, the electorate may well indicate tomorrow that they are more than willing to bestow democracy legitimacy on another group of people.
9.47 am

**Sir Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who has eloquently opened this debate and set out some pertinent questions that I hope the Minister will try to answer—probably with limited time.

The referendum was a vast vote of confidence by our people in the future of our country—a vote of confidence not entirely shared by the political class, who seem to suffer from a collective Stockholm syndrome: they cannot see a way forward without trying to hold on to nurse for fear of something worse. A lot of the problems we face in our democracy at the moment have arisen because although Parliament’s role is different from that of a referendum, we have to facilitate the decision, and I do not think Parliament has done the job that the people expected it to do when they elected it in 2017. Somehow, those of us who wish to enact the referendum have to try to find a way through.

A lot of the deal that the Prime Minister has agreed with the EU is not controversial; it is quite sensible, and is eminently voteable for. However, there is a big problem with that deal. There were no conterminous trade talks, so where we are going to land becomes a vacuum, into which the EU has very helpfully placed the backstop. That backstop should not be in the withdrawal agreement; it should be part of the trade talks. Nearly three years after the referendum, we are still arguing about whether we are going to be in the single market and what the relationships are going to be. That problem arises first from the EU’s response, but secondly from the Government’s response in accepting the EU response.

It is manifestly clear to me that 12 to 18 months ago, we should have walked out of the talks and gone for no deal, because the agreement is not fair and equitable. The fundamental problem in getting the deal through the House of Commons is the backstop and the fact that there is still great doubt about where we are going to land. Most of us want a good relationship with the Irish Republic and most of us want an open border. Had there been conterminous trade talks, we probably would not be very far away from having that as part of the agreement. Not doing conterminous trade talks was a monumental mistake, but it was made in the EU and in Downing Street. There were times in the negotiations where we needed a bit of handbagging, and we did not get it.

That leaves a problem. The one proposition that would go through the House is the deal without the backstop. If the backstop is taken out of the withdrawal Bill on Second Reading, I will vote for it, and I think the House will vote for it, but I suspect that the backstop will still be there, and that fundamentally is a problem. We have properly to prepare for no deal, because there are not many options if Parliament does not support the Prime Minister’s deal. As always, the people walking through the Lobby to vote against are those who do not like the deal, but they are also those who want to revoke or overturn the referendum. It is no doubt an unenviable and difficult task for the Prime Minister, because there are many swirling tensions and arguments over Europe that have been in the House for 20 years, and they are bedevilling the chances of our getting a deal and getting on to trade talks.

Moving on to no deal, a lot of preparation has been undertaken. Every time I used to read in the Sunday papers that some disaster would befall us, I would ask the then no-deal Minister, of which the current Minister is one of a succession, “Is this true and what we have done about it?” The no-deal Ministers have been doing a massive risk assessment of what could go wrong and what we should do about it. One Minister mentioned to me one day that a lot of British information was kept in southern Ireland, and they would have to repatriate it to British servers otherwise we could not access some of the things to do with pensions, benefits and everything else. I think we can all reassure ourselves that the civil service and the no-deal Ministers have done a pretty good job.

Pertinently, one of the no-deal Ministers said to me, “You can make lots of preparations. Clearly, if you go on to WTO terms overnight, there will be problems for exporters and businesses. That requires the Treasury to underwrite some of our businesses for a period of months.” We did that with the banking collapse, and we have done that at certain times in our history. For example, in the second world war when ships were being torpedoed, the British taxpayer paid for merchant shipping. We need to underwrite any kind of change with the resources of the UK Treasury. The problem many of us face is that people in the Treasury spend most of their time worrying about no deal and saying it will be a disaster, rather than preparing for it and backing what the British people want to do.

I am confident that a lot of things have been done by the Government. I am a little less confident that preparations for no deal have been undertaken by many private businesses, but the problem many of them have is that they prepared for no deal at the end of March. They are now left with large inventories. They have expended millions of pounds, and they do not know whether we will have no deal in October or maybe later. We may have a worse scenario with no deal because we put it off in March when people were preparing for it, because businesses now have to take some hard political decisions. If we look at the banks’ reports, they have all been lending money to their customers so that they can make preparations. There is of course a limit to what the banks will put forward and what companies will do.

There have been good preparations by no-deal Ministers. A no deal needs to be planned, organised and underwritten by the billions of the UK Treasury. I do not think it is a question of costing lots of money. The wheels of business turn, and if people find that a ship going to South Korea suddenly gets landed with tariffs or turned around, that will drive British exports to bust.

We need vision in British politics. Not only is there a vacuum in our future trade arrangements, but British politicians should be looking ahead with an optimistic view of how we are going to put our place in the world. There is an awful lot for us to do, but we desperately need to fulfil the terms of the referendum. The only way we will be able to do that, if things continue as they are, will be in a prepared, organised, and packed no deal where we get what we want to get. My view is that if the Prime Minister had stuck to the end of March, we would now be getting through the problems, rather than being up to our neck in them, but the fact that we are having an unwanted, uncalled-for European election is probably an awful indictment of where we are.

I am confident in the Minister, but it boils down to a question of trust. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues do not trust the EU, looking at the track record, but
there are severe concerns and question marks over the Prime Minister, and we see that, even when her own Cabinet have arguments. Sometimes people can vote for a deal they do not feel comfortable with if they feel that the person in charge is going to bat for them. Too many of my colleagues feel that that is not taking place. I am looking forward to the Minister’s response. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster for securing the debate. Many of us think we have to proceed, if necessary with a no-deal scenario that is well-organised, well-funded and successfully undertaken.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I am going to limit speeches to seven minutes so I can get everyone in.

9.55 am

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): That could be difficult, Mr Robertson. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this debate. Little did she know that it would serve as an opportunity to release some of the anger I feel following the announcement last night, but more of that later, perhaps.

As is often the case when I get to my feet here or in the Chamber, my audience first and foremost is the good people of Walsall North, because I am here to speak on their behalf and also to speak to them. They will be slightly perplexed, because tomorrow, we will take part in the European elections. That might sound like a fairly uneventful thing, but let us go over it again: tomorrow, we will take part in the European elections. Some 1,062 days ago, 17,410,742 people voted to leave the European Union, yet this Government have so far, after 1,062 days, been unable to deliver that. How do we think the people of Willenhall, Bloxwich and Walsall North are feeling? Not too good, I would say, and that was 24 hours ago. I am not sure how they are feeling after they heard from the Prime Minister yesterday.

Let us talk, however, about why my constituents might have voted to leave in the first place and how optimistic they might have felt. What grounds did those people have for their optimism, which we seem to have misplaced on their behalf? First, let us think about what was happening in 2010. In 2010, Merkel, the German Chancellor, was talking to Sarkozy, the French President, about reform of the Lisbon treaty. They wanted a little photo opportunity, so they took a walk along the beach in Deauville. They were able to do that without their advisers present. Why was that? We know that Merkel does not speak French and Sarkozy does not speak German, but they both spoke English. It is the universal language of business. What a great opportunity we have, because we speak a lot of English in this country. It is a handy place for people to locate their business.

Hiroshi Mikitani, the chief exec of Rakuten, certainly thinks that. He runs a business in Japan that employs 7,500 people. There must have been something in the air in 2010, because he told his business that from then on, it would conduct all its business transactions in—you guessed it—English, because he understood that it was the language of business across the world. The people of Walsall North understand that, too, which is why they believe that people come to locate their businesses in the great United Kingdom.

People right across the globe know where Liverpool, Manchester and London are. We know that because the premier league is broadcast in 221 areas across the world. It is the most successful football league anywhere on the planet. It is broadcast to 640 million houses, with a possible viewership of 4 billion. People right across the planet know where England is. They know where the constituent cities of our great country are because we have great advertising through the premier league.

If those people come here, will they be studying in great universities? According to the Centre for World University Rankings, they damn well will be. Those rankings put two of our universities in the top 10. Unfortunately, they did not have any room for any other European universities in the top 10. QS, on the other hand, put four of our universities in the top 20, and, once again, it did not have any room in the top 20 for other European universities. We have the best universities in Europe as well as having the premiership, and, conveniently for my speech today, the two teams contesting the final of the champions league happen to be from England.

A great nation has a fantastic opportunity and great optimism. People went to the polls and voted to leave because they damn well knew that the UK could make its own way in the world. They also knew that we were leaving the European Union, but not leaving Europe. They knew that nine out of 10 of our holiday destinations were to Europe. They will continue to take their holidays there and they expect us to continue to trade. We will still be friends and will still need each other’s products.

Peter Grant: Why is Thomas Cook in danger of going bust if people are still booking holidays in Europe?

Eddie Hughes: I do not know the answer to that. I am not aware of the story, but I do know that a couple of weeks ago Which? magazine published an article that said that TUI should not describe hotels that are not on the beach as being on the beach, so perhaps there are some other practices going on. I am not sure what the reasons are, but I am damn sure that we will continue to holiday in Europe: mostly in Spain, as it turns out. Perhaps the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) will share his travel plans for the summer with us later. I am going off course—we are a great nation with a great opportunity that has not been delivered by the Government so far.

So what happened? I came to Parliament and went along with my dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), to see the then Immigration Minister. We said, “We don’t think you are making good enough preparations for no deal, because those pesky people from mainland Europe will spot that, although we are telling them we are preparing for no deal, the fact that we have not submitted a single planning application to build any new infrastructure at our ports will probably give the game away that we are not actually committed to it.” It was like playing cards with somebody who had a mirror behind them. They were looking at our hands and saying, “We know you do not have aces. You are not building anything, and that puts us in a great position to negotiate a very weak deal for you and a very strong deal for us.”
Margaret Thatcher said she had the patriotic belief that the British people could achieve anything. If only our Prime Minister had that same belief in our great nation, we might not be in the position that we are in today. When we look forward to any future negotiations, let us believe in this great country, let us understand the reasons why 17,410,742 people voted to leave, and let us deliver on what they voted for because they deserve better.

10.2 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez). If we were allowed standing ovations, I would give one to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes).

Most frustratingly, the Prime Minister had it all together in her Lancaster House speech in 2017 when she talked about negotiating a “bold and ambitious” free trade deal with Europe that would give us the ability to strike out around the world. She did not pretend it would have all the same benefits of membership, because we were going to leave, but we would have a different and positive relationship. She was going to take back control of our money, borders and laws. She was quite right when she said that those things were highly important to people’s decision to vote leave in the referendum. Importantly, one of the few messages that really struck a chord with people out there in the country—a message that they heard and believed—was that “No deal is better than a bad deal.”

If the EU would not give us something that worked for the United Kingdom, we would walk away and succeed on our own merits. There is no point now in wishing that things were different, but it is heartbreaking that we have ended up here, when the Government had the right approach two and a half years ago—an approach that has long since been abandoned.

The referendum vote was a massive vote of confidence in the United Kingdom and in the Government. The people of Britain said, “We do not want people in Europe telling us what to do. We know and we believe that our Government in the United Kingdom has the strength and the power to deliver this difficult decision.” That huge trust is a burden that we should bear here in Parliament. We should have delivered. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) is absolutely right about what needs to happen now. She went into great detail about plans that need to be put in place for our exit on 31 October. We should keep trying to agree something; we have time, so we should keep trying. However, if the European Union sticks to its word, at the end of October we will probably be faced with the decision to leave without an agreement, or to stay in the EU. I will certainly not be a part of any party or group that tries to block or overturn Brexit at that point. We have to leave.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to reassure me on the points raised by our hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster. Will he assure us all that we are planning properly for our departure; that we will lay out our plans for the UK’s key priorities for trade and future relationships if we leave on WTO terms; that we have put in motion plans to mitigate the short-term adverse impacts; that we will ensure we have the necessary agreements in place to keep things moving; that we are looking at the practical delivery, not just the theory, of alternative proposals for the Irish border; and that the attitude of the Government and the civil service will be one of steely determination to deliver the smoothest possible exit on those terms, as it now seems the most likely outcome? It should be perfectly possible, as we will have had six months more to prepare than we had expected. The Minister’s predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), was adamant at the time of his resignation that we are as prepared as we could be, and I trust that that remains true.

We cannot start to heal the divisions that exist in this country until we have left the European Union. We cannot seek to restore trust and reaffirm democracy in this country until we have left the European Union. Anybody who wishes to lead this country and start to implement the positive, small “c” conservative agenda that those of us on the Government side of the House crave must first get their hands dirty with Brexit solutions, not just soundbites. They need to deliver and get us out on 31 October at the very latest, or we can be sure that, come the next election, no Conservative leader will be faced with the decision to leave without an agreement, or to stay in the EU. It is clear that the Prime Minister cannot get a better deal, as she has shown that she will not leave without the EU’s agreement. A new leader might be able to do something different, but the vital thing is that there can be no more delay and no more trying to fudge the withdrawal agreement into something acceptable, because it will not happen and is wasting time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster is absolutely right about what needs to happen now. We know and we believe that the British people could achieve anything. If only our Prime Minister had the patriotic belief that the British people could achieve anything. If only our Prime Minister had that same belief in our great nation, we might not be in the position that we are in today. When we look forward to any future negotiations, let us believe in this great country, let us understand the reasons why 17,410,742 people voted to leave, and let us deliver on what they voted for because they deserve better.

Ben Bradley: It is time for change. As my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position. There are two ways we can proceed: either we revoke article 50, which is totally unacceptable, or we stand firm in our commitment to leave on 31 October, come what may. A good deal would be great; no deal would be okay. Either way, we have to leave and we have to honour the promise that we made to the public.

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It is not only faith in the Prime Minister and the Conservative party that has been shaken by broken Brexit promises; it is faith in our entire political system and its institutions, and in politics as a whole. That faith
is not lost forever, but every day that we drift on without showing clear determination to honour the referendum result makes it harder to recover that trust. I hope the Minister can assure me that in his role with responsibility for preparing our leaving without an agreement, and in the absence of a deal that works for the UK, he is confident that everything is being done to ensure that we are in a position to leave on 31 October.

10.8 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) not only on securing this timely debate, but on her extremely thoughtful and persuasive opening speech. That wonderful speech illustrates why she is one of the rising stars of the Conservative party.

I am honoured to stand alongside the exceptionally talented 2017 intake of Members of Parliament. It is particularly bittersweet because we are all dealing with the consequences of decisions that were taken, in many cases, before we were born, and certainly many years ago. Those of us who speak from the back row in this debate are all post-referendum MPs. I was the first of them, so I take a slightly different attitude from many Members. My role is not to fight old battles or to justify why I took a particular position at the time, because I was elected, as all Conservative MPs were in 2017, on a manifesto committed to implementing the referendum result, that in/out referendum having been called on the back of a clear promise in 2015. That is the historic charge that we have been given, and it is an enormous honour for us to do it.

Fundamentally, Brexit is not a policy; it is a constitutional question. It is the fundamental issue of how this country is governed and by whom—whether it is by elected politicians in this place, whom the people can judge, and hire and fire as they desire, or by a supranational layer of government in Brussels. We will start to bring the country back together only by understanding that we were going to have to deal with that question, or one like it, at some point.

Anybody who voted at the time of our entry to the then Common Market in the early 1970s will say, “I thought I was joining a trading arrangement. I thought I was joining a common market.” Nobody thinks that now. Everybody now accepts that the European Union is a political union. People may have different views about how far it should stretch, but clearly it is no longer a trading organisation; we need only to look at the recent comments, which I do not need to repeat, by Guy Verhofstadt about a European empire, and President Macron's calls for further integration and a European army.

At some point, Britain had to deal with the logical consequences of joining a political union while trying to persuade itself, even to this day, that it is only a trading bloc. It is not a trading bloc, and we had to deal with that. We could not forever have remained reluctant passengers in a car going in a direction that we do not want to go in, constantly asking the driver to slow down or change direction. We had to decide whether we were going to be passengers or get off.

The issue was thrown into stark relief when Britain decided not to join the euro. From that point, some major, fundamental parting of the ways was going to happen, because a monetary union cannot exist without fiscal and political union. The European Union will have to integrate or accept that the euro will not survive. We wish them well with their project, but nobody in Britain wants to be part of a United States of Europe—or, at least, nobody who does want that has ever had the courage to make that argument.

A fundamental reassessment of our relationship was therefore going to have to happen, but that did not have to mean leaving. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster said, I was a firm supporter of David Cameron’s policy of remaining in a renegotiated European Union—one in which we could remain at the table but outside the political structures, in a second tier of membership. However, that question was settled when David Cameron’s renegotiation could not produce enough to persuade the British people to remain.

It would do all of us in this House, and the country, a lot of good to take some of the heat out of the issue, and accept that we were always going to have to renegotiate in some way our relationship with the European Union; and that once it became clear that the European Union would not budge and allow us to be part of a looser outer tier, we were probably going to have to leave. However, that does not mean that we raise the drawbridge, that we are not friends with our European neighbours, that we do not co-operate, or that we do not trade.

I take the slightly controversial view that the two sides of the argument are not as far apart as they think. Whenever I speak to someone in my constituency who wants to remain, I ask them why. They say, “Because I want to work with our European neighbours. I want us to trade closely with them. I want us to co-operate.” When I speak to somebody who voted to leave, I ask them what they want. They say, “I want to trade closely. I want to be part of a co-operative relationship. I want to be friends with our closest neighbours. I simply don’t want to be part of a political union. I’m comfortable with the concept of the nation state, and I want our decisions to be made here by our politicians—people we not only elect but can get rid of.” If people cannot dispense with those who govern them, they are not living in a proper democracy.

Let us now accept all that; let us accept that we have a historic charge that we have to carry out. It was not of our making; it was probably preordained to some extent, in many cases before we were born, and certainly before we became MPs. It would do us a lot of good to understand that and to ensure we have a close relationship, but that close relationship must have democratic accountability. If MPs exist to do one thing it is to defend their vote, their constituency MP and the rules that govern them.

I am conscious that I have run out of time; there is much more that I would love to say. My final point is simply that we can establish that relationship in a number of ways, but let us please have a spirit of optimism. We have to stop looking at Brexit as a damage limitation exercise. We are recovering full democratic self-government. That is something to be proud of—now let us get together and shape it.

10.15 am

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez)
on securing the debate, not least because it really has lived up to the quality that we hoped for. The debate has showcased voices from across our country—London, the midlands, the south and, now, the north-east—talking about the issues that matter to our constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) referred to his constituents. When I was talking to mine on the 2017 election trail, I was able to make three firm promises to them: first, that we would leave the single market and the customs union; secondly, that we would leave the European Union at the end of the two-year period under article 50, which turned out to be until 29 March; and thirdly, that we would not, under any circumstances, allow a second referendum. Those three promises all seem, in different ways, to be in jeopardy today, which is a source of grave concern. Most of my constituents have been left somewhere between bemusement and anger that we are in this situation.

On 12 February, my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) asked the Prime Minister whether we were “sufficiently prepared” to leave the EU on 29 March with no deal. The Prime Minister responded unequivocally, “We are indeed.” Given that colleagues had been calling for no-deal preparations from day one, and the Government had 9,000 civil servants with an extra £4.2 billion of funding working on those preparations, that answer was no less than we should have expected.

It was therefore both surprising and disappointing that on 13 March the Government supported a motion in the name of the Prime Minister to delay our exit from the EU on the ostensible grounds that we were not yet prepared. They argued that we were not ready to leave because approximately one third of UK businesses that trade with the EU had not yet registered with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. They also claimed that the border inspection posts for agricultural goods at Dover and Calais were not yet operational.

Despite repeated promises that the UK would leave the EU on 29 March, we now find ourselves in a six-month extension period. Although it is deeply regrettable the EU on 29 March, we now find ourselves in a region, said in January that their keenness to co-operate in a no-deal scenario. For example, Xavier Bertrand, president of the Hauts-de-France region, said in January that “the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk, as well as the Eurotunnel and airports,”

Julia Lopez: Does my hon. Friend agree that a customs union does not actually deliver frictionless trade?

Mr Clarke: Indeed it does not. It has become a holy grail—a totemic example of our determination somehow to be in and half-out at the same time. As other hon. Members have pointed out, that is a fundamentally untenable position. Making the decision to leave the European Union means embracing the choices, challenges and opportunities that come with that; the same would be true of the decision to be part of the European Union. There are trade-offs to be made in either position. In that respect, there has been a fundamental lack of honesty throughout the entire debate.

The European Commission’s own website states: “The Customs Union is a foundation of the European Union”.

I am clear that continued membership of the customs union would be not only a barren failure but a breach of faith with the referendum result. It was therefore with absolute incredulity that I watched the Prime Minister yesterday promising to adopt both the customs union and a second referendum as official Government policy if Parliament votes for them. Frankly, that position represents a devastating failure of politics, leadership and statecraft. Indeed, the only redeeming feature of the situation is that this desperate attempt to win the Labour party’s support must be the final one.

Many of us have advocated a Canada-style trading relationship with the EU, with frictionless trade and a high level of customs facilitation. In such an arrangement, we would be fundamentally responsible for controlling our internal affairs. Regrettably, we have encountered the twin misfortune of having a leader who never asked for it and an European Union that would rather turn us into a colony. Unless and until both those facts change, it is incumbent on us all to prepare for no deal. Indeed, on the very same day in March that Ministers stood at the Dispatch Box warning of the lack of preparedness for no deal, the European Parliament in Strasbourg voted through no-deal measures on, among other things, social security, road freight connectivity, basic air connectivity, the fishing fund, fishing vessels authorisation, railway safety and connectivity, and road haulage. There is no reason why there should be any interruption to or shortage of goods coming into the UK in a no-deal scenario.

Sir Robert Syms: Is it not a little ironic that the European Union’s no-deal preparations are much clearer than ours?

Mr Clarke: There is a bitter irony in that, as my hon. Friend rightly says. It speaks to the choices that we have made, but choices they were—it needs to be recognised and understood that there is nothing inevitable about the situation in which we have placed ourselves.

It is entirely up to us what barriers to impose on imported goods in any scenario. The Government have already said, quite rightly, that in the event that we leave with no deal, we will prioritise maintaining the flow of goods—even at the risk of losing some customs revenue—until long-term arrangements are in place.

Foreign countries and ports have also demonstrated their keenness to co-operate in a no-deal scenario. For example, Xavier Bertrand, president of the Hauts-de-France region, said in January that “the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk, as well as the Eurotunnel and airports,”
will
“have 100 per cent fluidity on day one in the event of a no-deal Brexit.”

We need to intensify our preparations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster said, and look at dynamic policy responses. People on Teesside are intrigued and excited by the possibility of a free port, which would really boost our connectivity in Teesside.

I welcome the Minister to his place. I have a huge amount of time for him; he is an amazing man who has done great things in our party, and I am sorry for him, because he is a good man about to defend a bad deal. None of my remarks will be directed against him personally.

We need to intensify our preparations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on securing this timely and important debate. I would particularly congratulate her on the timing if I thought that she had had any knowledge of what would happen yesterday, but given that I do not think that my Government had any knowledge of it, I am not sure that I can accord her that credit.

Two years ago, I made a series of commitments to my constituents, and I will not break those commitments even if the Prime Minister breaks hers. I said that we would leave on 29 March; I voted to leave on 29 March. It was because of the Prime Minister’s choice, not the highly inappropriate meaningful vote 3 that was scheduled for that date to embarrass people like me, that we did not leave on 29 March. I said that I would not support a customs union; now my own Government seek to put a customs union to the country. I said that I would not support a European election; tomorrow there will be a European election that should not happen. I said that no deal was better than a bad deal; I will continue to believe that, even if my Prime Minister no longer does.

Fundamentally, I said “No second referendum”—and what did I see yesterday? I saw a Prime Minister who is willing to chuck every single principle out of the window. He said that he would not support a customs union; now my own Government seek to put a customs union to the country. I said that I would not support a European election; tomorrow there will be a European election that should not happen. I said that no deal was better than a bad deal; I will continue to believe that, even if my Prime Minister no longer does. I said “No second referendum”—and what did I see yesterday? I saw a Prime Minister who is willing to chuck every single principle out of the window to push forward a deal that just will not get the support of this place and, more important, that does not have support outside it.

Every single principle is being put on the fire to get the deal through. It is absolutely outrageous—it is a fundamental misreading of what the people think. The Government are paralysed by inaction, every principle is being shredded, trust is shattered, and what is the apparent answer? Some kind of pick-and-mix, choose-your-own, go-your-own-way Brexit? Some kind of smorgasbord of stupidity? Some kind of Brexit of the shadows, where we push anything through and then let it get amended in Committee, where we think our constituents will not see it, will not comprehend that it is not Brexit, or will not understand that they have been lied to?

I am being asked to endorse something—anything, whatever—as Brexit, simply becomes somebody stands in front of a lectern and tells me it is so. I am being asked to coalesce—to unify—around a cult of stamina that goes nowhere and uses that Protestant work ethic to drive us off a cliff. I am being asked to look a fourth time at a deal that I have already rejected three times, when it has absolutely no coherence, absolutely no understanding and does not respect the will of the people.

We are not a parish council. We are not arguing for 20 years about where a bench should go in the local park. We have a unique responsibility to deliver what people have told us to deliver. I will keep that deal. I will ensure that the residents of North East Derbyshire understand that I am going to deliver my promises even if the leader of my party has decided to break hers.

Where do we go from here? The deal will not pass—that is blatantly obvious. The frustration will not go away. The difference will not be split.

Each of us is charged with a unique responsibility as an elected official to ask ourselves a series of deeply personal questions. How long will we allow this tragedy to persist in our name? How long can we look at a wreckage of a Government decaying before our eyes, when the principles that I came into politics for—those good Conservative principles—need to be used to make the constituency of North East Derbyshire and my country better? What will we say in a few years’ time, when it becomes painfully obvious that the abject failure of leadership over the past year was never going to get us anywhere?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster highlighted a statement that Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, made a few months ago. He said to us:

“Please do not waste this time.”

I agree with him. It is a Conservative Government—a Conservative Government!—who are wasting this time, failing to demonstrate leadership on the most important thing that we promised the people, and allowing trust in the entire democratic system to be shredded.

There is no dignity in this impasse. There is no honour in the abdication of this responsibility. There is no thanks for what we are doing. Wake up! Wake up before it is too late, and deliver what our country told us to do three years ago.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I remind the Chamber that I do not think anyone will be surprised that I disagree with quite a lot of what I have heard in the last 59 and a half minutes. In fact, most people in here, and a lot of people back home, would be extremely disappointed if I did not.
I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on securing the debate. She spoke very passionately and I have no doubt whatsoever that she spoke with complete sincerity, but I have to say that, far too often, she just does not get it. There was no recognition at all in her outline of how we got here that it was her party and her Government that put us here. Her party called a referendum to solve the endemic infighting within its ranks. We can see from this morning’s debate what a complete and abject failure that has been. Her party unilaterally changed its own manifesto mid-term, from one that gave it a majority Government and said we would stay in the single market and the customs union, to one that lost it that majority and said we are going to come out.

When I asked the hon. Lady what alternative she suggests to the Northern Ireland backstop, she promised to come back to it later. She then referred to the need—I think it is correct; I wrote it down—to “check and clear goods away from the border”. That would be a violation of the Good Friday agreement and incompatible with the Northern Ireland peace process.

How can it be that three years after the referendum and more than 20 years since the peace process was secured—a process that is still happening; it is not an event that is finished and done and dusted—we still have people leading debates in this Parliament, and speaking knowledgeably about other aspects of the relationship with the European Union, but not understanding what a catastrophic mistake it would be to think that border checks carried out somewhere away from the border would be good enough? They will not be. Nobody but nobody has suggested a solution that comes anywhere close to answering that contradiction. We cannot avoid a customs border between two countries if one is in a customs union and one is not. When the Government set out something that has been tested, and works, that will allow that to happen, then they can credibly say they will come out of the customs union and respect the Northern Ireland peace process and the Good Friday agreement. I do not think it is possible and I have seen no credible suggestion that it is.

It is not good enough to continually make the European Union out as the villain. The European Union did not force anybody to call a referendum. The European Union did not force anybody to trigger article 50 before anyone in the UK Government had a clue how they were going to deal with it. The European Union did not force the Prime Minister to unilaterally paint herself into a corner with red lines. The European Union did not force the Prime Minister to call an unnecessary election to enhance her majority and end up throwing it away. Those have all been mistakes that have been made by this and the previous Prime Minister. It is high time that the Conservative party accepted its collective responsibility for putting those Prime Ministers into power and supporting them through all those catastrophic mistakes, simply because it thought it might enhance the party’s chances of holding on to power for a wee bit longer.

Given that the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) was so glowing about trade and tourism between the UK and the European Union, I asked him why Thomas Cook was in trouble. He suggested it was because TUI had been criticised by *Which?* magazine. TUI is Thomas Cook’s biggest competitor in the United Kingdom. We might have thought that if TUI was being criticised and getting bad publicity that would help its biggest rival, rather than push it further into difficulty.

**Eddie Hughes:** There are many reasons that a business can go bad. It can be down to management or other changing circumstances. The idea that anyone could solely identify anything relating to Brexit as the reason for business failure seems—I don’t know—imaginative, at best.

**Peter Grant:** Sadly, it is not imaginative that British Steel has cited Brexit-related issues as one of the reasons why, as of about half an hour ago, it is now in insolvency and 25,000 direct and indirect jobs are under threat. That is not something anyone can celebrate or be happy about. Surely it is time for everyone who continues to push us towards the possibility of a no-deal Brexit to stop and ask the question: would the 66% of people in and around Scunthorpe who voted to leave in 2016 have done so if they had understood what it might mean for their town’s biggest employer? I do not know the answer to whether they would have voted the same way, but I would like to give them the chance to answer the question again.

Comments have been made in this debate and others about the 80%-plus of the electorate who voted for pro-Brexit parties in 2017. Some 80%-plus of the electorate voted for pro-remain parties in 2015, because Labour and the Tories were both remain parties in 2015. We are saying that in the space of two years, 66% of the electorate changed from voting for remain to voting for Brexit, but three years after the referendum, we are not allowed to consider the possibility that 5% of the electorate might have changed their minds between remain and leave. It simply does not add up.

**Lee Rowley:** The hon. Gentleman has said that surely it is time for us to understand the consequences of the issue. Surely it is also time for him to acknowledge that he should not use business examples to extrapolate, as he did with Thomas Cook. He will know as well as I do that it has had a massive debt pile for a number of years, that most of its operations are external, that it was previously a German company and that it is seeking to sell off its German airline as much as its British one. These are wide trends and it is just not correct to use these debates to try to extrapolate things that are not directly linked.

**Peter Grant:** Again, I hope that nobody would suggest that the problems in the UK travel industry are completely unrelated to Brexit or that the problems in the British steel industry are completely unrelated to Brexit. It is not the only problem—in manufacturing, we have not kept up with the advances in productivity of our European neighbours, for example—but anyone who would suggest that this catalogue of company failures is not in any way related to the damaging Brexit that the Conservatives are leading us through really needs to face up to reality.

I understand the desire to respect the result of the referendum. I want the 62% result in my country to be respected as well. My national Government put forward a compromise as long ago as December 2016, which was laughed out of court at the time—to the extent that...
the Prime Minister has actually forgotten that it ever existed. When we are talking about negotiations that might happen now, after the March deadline, is it not a pity that there was not proper negotiation before the red lines were painted?

We have an electoral system in these islands that is deliberately rigged to turn minority popular support into majority Government. When the people choose not to give a big majority Government, the system cannot cope. The Prime Minister came back in 2017 and acted as if she had a huge majority in Parliament, when most of the time she has struggled to maintain a majority within her own party, and that is why she has never been able to get any kind of deal through.

It is not just about trade. Most of the contributions we have heard today have been about trade deals. World Trade Organisation terms—assuming we are allowed in to the WTO, which is not automatic—do nothing about Horizon, Erasmus, the European Medicines Agency, security co-operation, the rights of 4.5 million citizens, the ability to share data to cloud storage in the European Union, or about a million and one other things that the European Union brings us as benefits that have hardly, if at all, been mentioned in the debate this morning. The European Union is not simply a trading organisation. Membership has brought massive economic, social, cultural and educational benefits to our people and it is a tragedy that in the lead-up to the referendum, so few politicians in this place had the courage to stand up and say that.

I was asked about my holiday plans. I will be holidaying in the country that, according to “Rough Guides”, is the most beautiful country in the world, and I would encourage lots of other people to do the same.

As far as what will happen if and when the withdrawal agreement Bill comes back, the position of the Scottish National party is as it has always been. We will oppose any Brexit that takes away the rights of our citizens. We will oppose any Brexit that makes our people poorer. We will oppose any Brexit that takes further away from the Scotland that we want to be and that our people have told us they want us to help to build.

While tomorrow it is quite possible that the far-right Brexit party will secure a significant victory in other parts of the United Kingdom, the polls suggest that even after 12 years in Government, the Scottish National party will have its most successful European election ever. That is what happens if a party of Government is prepared to show leadership and to face up to the myths, lies and misinformation that Mr Farage and his party and his previous parties have spread for so long.

If tomorrow the results in the rest of the United Kingdom are taken as a message about discontentment with the European Union among the population of some partners in this Union, the results north of the border will give a clear statement about the dissatisfaction of the citizens of my country with the Union that we have been part of for 300 years too long.

10.39 am

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, although I feel that it has been somewhat of an internal Conservative party discussion. To sum up for the Minister, I do not think his colleagues are very happy. It is a pleasure, too, to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I have a great deal of time for many things he said. Perhaps with the exception of the Minister, most hon. Members here in Westminster Hall agree that the Government have mishandled negotiations and served up a deal that is unsupportable by a majority in the House.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) used some memorable phrases. He talked about the situation being a “catastrophe” and “stupidity”, and said “the Government are tired”. He said that it is a “Brexit of the shadows,” that there is a “cult of stamina,” and that we have a “wreckage of a Government decaying before our eyes”. That is pretty damning from a fairly new MP about the one job on which the Prime Minister said she should be supported: delivering Brexit. That is what Conservative MPs think about it. It is a pretty incredible situation for us to have reached.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez). Although I did not agree with everything she said, I found the manner in which she said it, the tone she used and the considered way she formed her argument quite refreshing. It is not the way these discussions have often been carried out in this place and outside. If we could have had a bit more of that kind of discussion, perhaps we would have avoided getting to where we are, three years after the referendum.

The hon. Lady spoke of her maiden speech, which I do not think I caught. She made me think of my maiden speech nearly 10 years ago, in 2010. I remember speaking about cuts to education and about serious crime, and I promised that I would always put my constituents first, which is something that is felt by everybody who gets elected to this place.

I regret some of the comments that have been made. I think the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said—I wish I had written it down, because I cannot remember the exact words he used—that we despise our constituents if we do not happen to agree with some of them on Brexit. I find that unhelpful, and it misrepresents the relationship we have with our constituents, which is absolutely one of respect and understanding. We attempt to represent the whole of our constituencies, even though they are inevitably divided on this issue at the moment.

Mr Simon Clarke: This is really important. Every constituency in the Tees valley voted to leave by more than 60%. In some cases, it was nearer 70%. That was a very clear mandate to leave. Of the six Tees valley MPs, I am the only one who is voting to leave the European Union and trying to deliver on the referendum mandate. Can the hon. Lady inform the House what she is doing to support any meaningful exit, or is she in fact determined to prevent it?

Jenny Chapman: In fact, my constituents in Darlington did not vote by more than 60% to leave the European Union.

Mr Simon Clarke: Can the hon. Lady give the percentage?

Jenny Chapman: Fifty-six. My constituency boundary is different from the borough boundary, as the hon. Gentleman probably knows. Nobody really knows what percentage of my constituents voted to leave, but that is not really the point. The fact is that, like all hon. Members present, a large number of my constituents wished to leave the European Union, which is why I voted to
trigger article 50. I campaigned to remain. I believed that being part of the European Union would serve this country better in the future than leaving it, but I promised—as did many of my colleagues—to respect the outcome of the referendum. I have done that, and I voted to trigger article 50. I did not agonise about it; I saw it as my job and duty, and I did it with a clear heart. I then stood to be re-elected in 2017, as did we all, and I said that the kind of Brexit I wanted was something that at the time we all referred to as a soft deal. I would have voted for that. We would have left the European Union had that been on offer, but it never has been.

There was no deal until very recently, and we now find ourselves with something that the hon. Gentleman will not support, so I do not quite understand how he can have a go at me for not supporting it. It seems that no hon. Members present, apart from the Minister, want to support the existing deal.

Mr Simon Clarke: Will the hon. Lady give way one more time?

Jenny Chapman: Oh, one more time. Go on.

Mr Simon Clarke: Can I clarify that the Labour party manifesto is clear about leaving the single market and the customs union? It was clearly implied in the Labour manifesto that freedom of movement would end, and that there would be a free trade policy.

Jenny Chapman: We are saying that following the referendum and the general election, we need to have a close, collaborative relationship with the European Union. We want the benefits—as were promised by the then Secretary of State—of a customs union and the single market. I do not know—perhaps the Minister can tell us—how we achieve such benefits, particularly of a customs union, without being in a customs union. How do we get frictionless trade? The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster is completely right to say that we will not get frictionless trade via a customs union alone, but we sure as hell cannot have such trade without one.

There is not a customs border between two different jurisdictions anywhere on the planet that does not have infrastructure. That really gets to the heart of this issue. Despite all this stuff about alternative arrangements, no one has been able to tell me what alternative arrangements we could put in place that would avoid infrastructure. We talk about Northern Ireland, because there are very obvious reasons why we want to maintain an infrastructure-free border there, but the same problems would arise at other ports of entry.

Alternative arrangements just do not exist. If somebody could persuade us that alternative arrangements could be put in place that would mean we do not need a border, it would be a really interesting conversation. If we could leave a customs union without infrastructure, and Ministers showed how that could be done, I would be obliged to seriously consider voting for that. However, the case has never been made, and alternative arrangements have never been outlined. We have never seen an example of how they would work. Nobody is persuaded, which is one of the reasons why we find ourselves where we are.

It struck me that hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire, object to the Prime Minister’s suggestion that we should have a customs union or another vote. I understand where he is coming from—he is being completely consistent. He thinks we are being offered a customs union and a confirmatory vote, but one of the problems that the Opposition have with the Prime Minister’s speech yesterday is that but we do not think that is what is being offered. The lack of clarity and the attempt somehow to speak slightly differently to people who have different perspectives is one of the reasons we find ourselves in this position. There is a lack of trust, a lack of faith and a lack of confidence that this Prime Minister will be able to see the deal through. I find myself wondering—I am sure I am not alone—whether we will hold a vote on the Bill in the first week of June. It would be true to form to get quite close and then for the Government think better of it and withdraw the proposal—in the end, we would not get to vote on it.

I want to give the Minister sufficient time to respond to questions, particularly those from the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster on our preparedness for a no-deal Brexit. Given everything we have learned from listening to industry, I venture to guess that we are nowhere near ready to leave without a deal. We do not have the infrastructure, IT or staff, and we do not have the procedures or any of the things that we will need in place to leave without a deal, certainly not by the end of October. I will be fascinated to hear how the Minister thinks we will leave.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster said one thing that really struck me: she pleaded that service to nation, not political ambition, should drive decision making as we go forward towards the end of October. I worry about that a great deal. Looking at the people who are putting themselves forward from the Conservative party to be Prime Minister, it strikes me that its members might prefer the candidate who takes the hardest position, is the most enthusiastic about leaving the EU without a deal, and promises that we will prorogue Parliament until the end of October to ensure that we get to leave without a deal.

I caution the Conservatives that that would be a disaster for the country and its constituencies. I know what industrial decline looks like, and what being cavalier about these things can do to communities. They do not recover for decades, if ever. I worry about that for the country, and for the health of our democracy, too. Our democracy needs a well-functioning multiplicity of parties competing and holding each other to account. If the Tory party did that to itself, satisfied as I would be that it would be out of power for a generation, I do not think it would be the healthiest thing for our democracy. I am surprised to hear myself saying those things, but I really hope it does not elect an extreme no-deal Brexiteer to be the Prime Minister of this country. I look forward to the Minister’s response.
and important issues. I will attempt to address them in the limited time that we have, but I also want to give her time to respond to the debate that she initiated.

I remind hon. Members that the Government, much like the majority of MPs, want to deliver on the result of the referendum and leave the European Union promptly and in good order. The British public are justifiably frustrated—that is an understatement—and the tone and passion of this debate is reflective of the public mood. They want us to act together in the national interest, end this impasse and deliver Brexit. Delivering Brexit was never going to be simple or straightforward, but the Government firmly believe that the best way to leave the European Union is with a good deal.

At the most recent European Council, the UK and the EU agreed an extension to article 50 until 31 October. It was also agreed that if we successfully brought forward a withdrawal agreement, we would be able to leave earlier. That is why the Prime Minister put forward a range of options hopefully to build a consensus that can secure a vote for the withdrawal agreement so the UK can leave the EU promptly.

The Prime Minister has worked hard to find a way forward that accommodates concerns from across the political spectrum, and yesterday she presented a new deal to MPs to settle the core issues of the debate. MPs must now work together to deliver the result of the 2016 referendum.

A number of hon. Members cited the Prime Minister’s words, “No deal is better than a bad deal.”

The Government’s position is that the deal that has been negotiated over the past few years is a good deal, but hon. Members have criticised it. If you will forgive me, Mr Robertson, I will dwell briefly on why it is, Mr Robertson, I will dwell briefly on why it is a good deal for farmers and fishermen up and down the country, and a good deal for farmers and fishermen up and down the country. I will address some of the points that my hon. Friend for Hornchurch and Upminster made. She asked about border preparation work. My officials and I have regular meetings to ensure that the UK border is operational and in good order, and that trade flows can continue with the minimum amount of friction in the event of a no-deal Brexit, with a cross-Government borders programme. All Departments will be able to set up fully and partially operated systems, processes and resources to ensure disruption is minimised as far as possible.

My hon. Friend asked about labour market preparations. We are in the enviable position of having incredibly low levels of unemployment. The Government will ensure that any changes in the labour market are reflected in Government policy.

My hon. Friend asked about the use of Henry VIII powers. The use of statutory instruments came after a decision by Parliament during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Every SI using those powers is scrutinised by Parliament in the usual way, and there is a new sifting mechanism.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to answer all the questions I was asked, because I want to address the broader point about no-deal preparations. Although Parliament has rejected the UK leaving the EU without a deal multiple times, that remains the legal default position if a deal is not agreed. As a responsible Government, we have been preparing for more than two years to mitigate any negative effects and any disruption as far as possible in the event of no deal. Those preparations are well developed and ongoing. We continue to prepare for all Brexit scenarios. Some £4.2 billion of funding has been allocated to help the UK prepare for all eventualities. It is only sensible that we do that.

Although the Government’s preparations continue, many of the most important mitigations require businesses and citizens, not just the Government, to act. There are also consequences that are simply not within the Government’s direct control, such as the actions of third countries. We should be under absolutely no illusion that not leaving the European Union would have a significant negative social, political and economic impact. That is another reason why leaving with a deal is the best option.

People want politicians to act together and honour the result of the 2016 referendum so we leave the European Union in good time and good order. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) highlighted the fact that Labour is uncomfortable with elements of the deal. The only way it could have influence on the future deal is to vote on Second Reading for the withdrawal agreement Bill. I therefore encourage all hon. Members to do what the people of Britain demanded of us, ensure we leave the European Union in the national interest, and back the deal.
My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) released a lot of tension this morning. It was a wonder to behold. He is an eternally optimistic champion of an eternally optimistic constituency. Hearing that optimism being misplaced is a matter of profound regret.

The description of Government’s negotiating style as being like playing cards with a mirror behind us was painfully accurate. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) talked of broken promises and the increasingly muddled and contradictory withdrawal agreement, which he doubts has any life left in it. He is right that we have no further time for delay.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) highlighted the different perspective of the 2017 intake. He is absolutely right that how we dealt with the challenge of the EU’s political ambitions was always going to lead to a fissure. He said that the two sides of the divide in our country are not so far apart, and that we can heal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) talked of our collective shame that we have not delivered on the promises we made to our voters, and said that too much time has been wasted. We all want to leave the European Union in an orderly way, but that option has been closed off by ineptitude.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) has been in a perpetual state of outrage since Chequers in July. We have had many quiet moments to share that. I appreciate his support. I thank everybody for a very good debate.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
justice and prevent injustice, the duty to stay an indictment must be used only in extreme and clear circumstances, to ensure that there is no abuse of the judicial process?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: In the context of the debate, the hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

My constituent, Mr Perry, was heavily involved in the case of Caldicott School, which was heard in Aylesbury Crown court. As a pupil there in the ’60s, he and many other boys suffered very considerable and grave child abuse that has been the subject of criminal proceedings. The Minister may recall that in that case, the defendant, former headmaster Mr Wright, was eventually tried and convicted on 17 December 2013, and was sentenced to eight years imprisonment on 6 February 2014.

I say “eventually”, because there were two indictments brought in this case. The first was in 2003 and the second in 2012—tried in May and June 2013 and re-tried in November 2013. Of the two indictments, only the second proceeded to trial. The first was stayed by an order made by his honour Judge Connor, following the application of the defendant and his legal team, at a non-evidential pre-trial abuse of process hearing in Aylesbury Crown court on 26 September 2003.

In criminal proceedings, an order to stay an indictment results in the termination of that indictment. The counts that related to the extensive abuse suffered at Caldicott School by my constituent, as well as by four other former pupils, were contained in the first indictment, which was stayed. That meant that the history of abuse suffered at the school by my constituent and the other former pupils was never heard in open court. Not unnaturally, my constituent and the other former pupils were deeply unhappy with that outcome.

My constituent was even more unhappy about that negative outcome because it later emerged that the court had been gravely misled by the failure of the defence, which applied for the stay, to disclose relevant information to the court. With that information, his honour Judge Connor might not have considered the stay of the indictment justified. My constituent tells me that all the details of that were set out in correspondence with the Crown Prosecution Service at the time and copied to the office of the Attorney General.

It emerged in particular that before the hearing in September 2003, the defence solicitors, Blaser Mills, had engaged in private correspondence with the school on the subject of the availability of the school pupil records to the defence. Had that correspondence been disclosed to the court, it could have assisted the prosecution in opposing the application for the stay and, in all probability, would have undermined the grounds of the application to stay the proceedings on the indictment. However, neither the judge nor the prosecuting counsel ever saw the correspondence because it was never produced in open court, even though, according to the transcript of the proceedings, the counsel for the defendant, A. J. Bright QC, had it with him in court and was aware of its contents.

The contents of the hidden correspondence only became known publicly five years later, when in November 2008, the school released it into the public domain. It then became apparent to everyone involved in those proceedings how the non-disclosure meant that the court had been misled and, in effect, deceived into making the order for the stay of the original indictment. That situation was bad enough, but according to my constituent, what followed was arguably worse still.

With the trial on the second indictment looming, my constituent and his co-complainants, who had resigned themselves to the impossibility of their cases ever being heard in open court, were naturally concerned about the position of the other five former pupils whose abuse at Caldicott School was the subject of the second indictment. Their concerns grew when it became known that the defence intended to argue that the second indictment should be stayed on the same grounds as had applied to the first indictment. Accordingly, they repeatedly pressed the CPS to ensure that those submissions made to the judge and accepted by him in the September 2003 abuse of process hearing should be formally corrected to the court.

Their argument was that those submissions, which the defence already knew to be false at the 2003 hearing, were now known to be wrong by all parties and the public at large following the release into the public domain of the correspondence between Caldicott School and the defence solicitors, Blaser Mills. Formal correction of those false submissions was needed to prevent the possibility of the court being misled in the same way that it had been in 2003.

Attention was drawn to the explicit wording of both the Solicitors Regulation Authority handbook and the Bar Standards Board handbook—I have made the relevant sections of both available to the Minister—and to the professional obligation resting on all solicitors and counsel, as officers of the court, to correct submissions of fact made to the court once they are known to be erroneous, to prevent the court from being misled further. It was noted that no one, not even those responsible for making the wrongful submissions in the first place, has been heard to deny that false submissions had been made at the September 2003 hearing or that the effect of that was that the court was misled and proceeded to rule on the basis of false information.

To my constituent’s complete and abiding astonishment, the CPS did absolutely nothing. While not disagreeing that the defence had acted improperly by telling the judge that the pupil records could not be obtained from the school, or even tacitly accepting that the court had been misled by that, it took no action at all. However, not only were the records available but, in the hidden correspondence that the judge never saw, the defence had actually relinquished its request to be given them.

In addition, the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board took no action. Likewise, the Office of the Attorney General, from which at least my constituent might have expected some intervention, given the failure of the regulatory bodies to deal with the situation, did nothing. Only at a much later stage, when the defendant, following his conviction and sentence, applied for leave to appeal to the Court of Appeal, did the CPS finally agree with the complainants that, if leave to appeal conviction were granted and if the defence were to argue that the grounds of the imposition of the stay of the indictment in September 2003 were relevant to the appeal—in fact, it transpired that the defence did intend to argue exactly that—it would finally take action. It would require corrections to be made to the false submissions made in 2003 by counsel and solicitors for the defence in order to ensure that the
I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on those failures to disclose and on the misleading of the court consequent to the erroneous submissions made to it. The formal confirmation of the Minister is needed to reassure my constituent that solicitors and counsel are professionally obliged to make such corrections as soon as possible, and that in future, where necessary, robust and firm action will be taken by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board in order to prevent the possibility of any court being misled in that way in the future.

I hope that the Minister, in responding, will bear in mind that I have known my constituent, Mr Perry, for 20 years. I have been dealing with his case and other matters pertaining to him for a long time. He is a man of great honour and integrity, and he has come forward to speak out in public about some horrendous abuse he suffered in childhood, thereby hoping to prevent something similar happening to other children in the future. This is just part of that pattern. I hope that the Minister will give a positive response in this debate.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I would like to make progress.

The abiding concern of those complainants, however, is that to their knowledge nothing has been done to prevent the distressing situation in which they found themselves recurring in other cases, concerning other abused children. The men involved felt rightly aggrieved about the wrongfulness of the Law Society and the Bar, and their respective regulators, holding out to the public the existence of certain published professional standards intended for the protection of the public, while at the same time appearing in this case to have had no intention of taking any action at all, even when the published professional standards were found unarguably to have been breached. Throughout this case, those men have felt that they have been stonewalled. They have now lost faith in the so-called professional standards.

Such matters are the responsibility of the Office of the Attorney General. That can be seen clearly in the “Protocol between the Attorney General and the Prosecuting Departments”, at page 7, under the heading “4(d) Superintendence of casework”:

“The Attorney General’s responsibilities for superintendence and accountability to Parliament mean that he or she, acting in the wider public interest, needs occasionally to engage with a Director”—the Director of Public Prosecutions—

“about a case because it...has implications for prosecution or criminal justice policy or practice; and/or reveals some systemic issues for the framework of the law, or the operation of the criminal justice system.”

In the Minister’s response, I trust that she will provide the reassurance that is sought by my constituent, together with many of his former school colleagues, who were the subject of such appalling abuse at Caldicott School. I trust that she will now agree to include in her review the dual problem: first, non-disclosure of relevant facts and matters by the defence in criminal proceedings in situations in which a duty of disclosure rests on the defendant and his legal team; and, secondly, the apparent impossibility my constituent faced in attempting to procure corrections of the records of the court to solicitors and counsel, and the refusal of the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board to assist him in any way.
All parties to ensure that what they submit does not in any way mislead the court, and that applies to the defence just as it does to the Crown? 

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important point that I will come on to. It is absolutely right that counsel or solicitor must not mislead the court, as officers of the court with a primary duty to the court and not to their client, but the disclosure of evidence is a different obligation on the defence. There is no corresponding legal duty on the defence to disclose information that is harmful to its case, because that is consistent with the fundamental principle that it is for the prosecution to prove its case and not for a defendant to prove their innocence.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham rightly identified, there is an important duty on counsel and barristers; they have a professional code of conduct that includes the requirement to act ethically and with integrity at all times. That includes a prohibition on knowingly or recklessly misleading anyone, including a court, and a positive duty to behave in a way that maintains public trust and confidence in the proper administration of justice. My right hon. Friend mentioned that her constituent may have details of other cases where a court has been misled; I strongly encourage her to share those details with the CPS and the professional bodies responsible for barristers and solicitors.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am grateful to the Minister for the way in which she is responding. She mentioned that it is important to maintain trust in the regulatory bodies. In the light of the circumstances of this case, does she agree that trust has been shaken? I will provide her with those details once my constituent provides them, so she may pass them on to the relevant authorities or look at them herself, because it is from her office that I believe my constituent wishes to have a response.

The Solicitor General: I appreciate that my right hon. Friend’s constituent feels that trust in the criminal justice system has been shaken. That is of concern. I reiterate that as far as I am aware no misconduct has been found by the Bar Standards Board in relation to the case, but I would be very happy—as I am sure it would—to receive any further information that she can provide.

I would like to underline the additional safeguards that exist for defendants and victims when a stay application is brought. There are a number of rules and regulations that ensure that the hearing should be conducted with due notice and in the interests of justice. The Criminal Procedure Rules 2015 set out clearly the timetable that the defence and prosecution should adhere to when preparing for the hearing. For example, the defence application must be in writing and provided to the prosecution and court as soon as practicable after becoming aware of the grounds for applying. The application must include or identify any supporting material, specify all relevant events and identify any witnesses the defendant wishes to call in support of the application. The prosecution must do likewise within 14 days of receiving the application. Both parties must serve skeleton arguments on each other and the court in advance of the actual hearing, so that everyone knows the issues to be determined at the hearing.
Victim care is important in cases of sexual abuse. Mr Perry’s experience demonstrates why it is so important that we continue to make victim care a priority in our criminal justice system.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I agree with the Minister that victims should have priority in our criminal justice system—that is most important. She mentioned at the beginning of her response that she is working on new guidelines that will come out shortly. Could she give us a greater indication of when we can expect those new guidelines? Would there be any possibility of looking at the draft guidelines before they are finalised and published?

The Solicitor General: A review of disclosure has already taken place. Further guidance will come out in due course. I am happy to update my right hon. Friend on any further details on that and will take on board any points that she might like to make.

We are not just focusing on disclosure, although that is very important. The CPS has almost doubled the number of specialist prosecutors in its dedicated rape and serious sexual offence units, and is working with the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to revise the victims code, to improve the support and care offered to victims. It is important to remember that these issues do not just affect the Attorney General’s office but are cross-departmental, and we are working together with Departments on those. Debates on this area make an important contribution to the ongoing work to improve the experience of victims in the criminal justice system. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham and her constituent for raising important issues that affect our criminal justice system.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Pension Funds: Financial and Ethical Investments

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I beg to move.

That this House has considered financial and ethical risks of investments in fossil fuel companies by pension funds.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, in which I disclose my interest in renewable energy, particularly solar.

Parliament has declared a climate emergency. I welcome that tremendously, but it prompts the question: how do we solve that emergency? The good news is that many of the technologies we need are already here, and they are developing fast. From solar to wind to storage, their price is coming down fast—far faster than many people expected—and their reliability is increasing dramatically. On top of that, massive innovation will propel those technologies further forward, and we will enter a cheap green energy age.

The barriers to dealing with the climate emergency are no longer technological; they are more about policy, leadership and cash. We need politicians to show leadership, but we also need to ensure that investment funds get behind the new technologies at a speed and with an urgency that currently we are not seeing. That is why we, as a country and as the world, need to disinvest from fossil fuels and dirty technologies, and reinvest in clean green technologies. The question is how we propel that as fast as possible.

I believe we need a system-wide approach. We have to decarbonise capitalism at a fundamental level across the whole of the City—the debt markets, the stock exchange, the banks, the Bank of England’s own balance sheet and the pension funds. The Committee on Climate Change has asked for Britain to become carbon net zero by 2050, but we produce only 1% to 1.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. However, 15% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions are funded in London, so not only do we have the power to get our own country’s greenhouse gas emissions down to zero, but we can help spread that around the world and be a real leader. We could be the green finance capital of the world and say, “We will no longer finance the climate crisis in our country.” If we did that, we would show dramatic leadership in the world on this emergency. We should start with pensions.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman is making a cogent argument. Can he assure me that the parliamentary pension fund, which has long been looking at this issue, is now clear of fossil fuels? We should ensure that that is completely the case.

Sir Edward Davey: I believe that is not the case. We need to ensure that the parliamentary pension fund becomes zero-carbon. We as Parliament need to say, “Divest Parliament.” That would show leadership both to public schemes, particularly in local authorities, and to the wider sector. Let us remember that we have already discovered four to five times the fossil fuels the
The previous Government target to cut carbon emissions by 80% by 2050 is no longer relevant because we have to cut our emissions to net zero, so fracking, which is a source of carbon fuel, is no longer an option for this country. Should not the world need to exceed a climate change budget. It has nowhere to go.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The previous Government placed tough regulations on that sector, which were based strongly on environmental considerations. It has not been able to grow to meet new powers? Such leadership would have an immediate consequence: investment in fracking as a source of fossil fuel would no longer be an option or attractive to investors.

Sir Edward Davey: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. In government, we placed tough regulations on that sector, which were based strongly on environmental considerations. It has not been able to grow to meet them. It has nowhere to go.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I agree entirely that Parliament should take the lead in not investing in fossil fuels. Yesterday, BP's investors decided that it should adopt a totally different strategy on carbon fuels so it fits in with the Paris agreement on climate change. Does he agree that other companies should take that way forward?

Sir Edward Davey: I saw what happened at the BP annual general meeting yesterday, and I welcome it, although a second motion, which was a bit stricter, did not carry. I would have liked that motion to carry.

That brings me to my argument. Not only is there a moral imperative for us to divest, given the threat climate change poses to our planet; there is also a financial risk for pension funds and their beneficiaries. We need to explore that. We need to make it clear to pension fund managers and trustees that pulling out of fossil fuels is the right thing to do in financial terms. The real issue is often called the carbon bubble. We are investing in more fossil fuels than we could possibly need if we were going to stay climate change compliant. At some stage, that bubble of investment in carbon that we do not need will burst, leaving pension funds and the wider economy in a serious mess. Those assets would be worthless; they would be stranded assets, which would cause huge disruption in our financial sector.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I agree completely with what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. I think he is coming to the heart of the matter. I, like many other people, have a private pension fund, and I instruct my broker to ensure that it is directed into ethical investments. Of course, the broker has always said, "You're not going to get as much of a return as you might get if you invested in other things." The time has come for that paradigm to be reversed. We have to explain to investors that, over the next 10 to 15 years, increasing governmental action against fossil fuels and dirty technology will make their returns worse. Now is the time to jump ship and to disinvest from dirty technology.

Sir Edward Davey: I totally agree. Indeed, analysis by the Grantham Institute shows that if someone had not held fossil fuels in their portfolio for the last 30 years, their overall returns would not have been any different. The idea that we have to invest in fossil fuels to have a return was not true in the past, and it is not going to be true in the future.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I thought I would intervene at this stage to try to frame the debate, because I think some colleagues will not be aware of the Pension Protection Fund (Pensionable Service) and Occupational Pension Schemes (Investment and Disclosure) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations 2018, which the House passed in September last year. Those regulations require environmental, social and governance matters to be taken into consideration as part of the statement of investment principles, and require individual pension fund trustees to take into account ESG factors when considering their strategic process to invest. I suggest that is one of the reasons why BP, the parliamentary scheme and others are beginning to change their approach. Those regulations will come into force in October.

Sir Edward Davey: I am grateful to the Minister for his intervention. Those new ESG guidelines are helpful, but I am afraid I do not think they are quite up to the scale of the task we face. I will come to that in a second.

We have this carbon bubble; the question is how we are going to deflate it. How will we move from where we are now, with this big risk to our economy, to the low-carbon economy we need? One option is to say, "Well, it will sort itself out. We don't need to worry now. We can delay it all and it will be all right. We can allow the fossil fuel companies to keep investing in exploring and getting even more fossil fuels, and inflate that bubble even more." How risky would that be? That is one scenario that some people seem to think is possible. I reject it entirely.

Another approach is to say, "Let's reduce, and ultimately stop, exploration for further fossil fuels. Let's not inflate that bubble any more. Let's gradually deflate it, so we can have an orderly transition for our economy, our energy sector and all the communities, towns, cities and people who depend on it." That is the solution, and that is why I have concluded that we must disinvest and reinvest in a thoughtful, careful way. If we do that, we can tackle the climate emergency and avoid a financial and economic catastrophe.

That brings me to the Minister's point. There are three possible approaches to disinvestment and investment. One is what I would call the gentle, market-led approach, which says, "If you have a bit more transparency and disclosure and a few ESG guidelines, it will all take care of itself." I am in favour of all that stuff, but it is nowhere near up to the task. It is not urgent enough. We have people talking about voluntary disclosure. No, we need mandatory disclosure now, regulated by this House. I applaud the ESG guidelines, but they are a little woolly and poorly defined. They are little nudges when we need more than a nudge, because this is an emergency.

There is a second, state-led approach advocated by at least one Front-Bench team, involving wholesale nationalisation and dismantling capitalism. That would
be the wrong approach, because it would delay action and not enable us to take the power of capitalism, with market forces, innovation and competition, to help us solve the problem.

We need to make capitalism our servant, not our master, and that comes from laws and regulations in this House. I propose a five-point plan systematically to decarbonise capitalism and tackle the disinvestment and investment challenge of the pension funds. First, there should be mandatory disclosure from all fossil fuel companies on how much carbon their business plans would see emitted and how much carbon is in their reserves. That should be coupled with a legal requirement to show how they will become compliant with the Paris treaty, with timed targets, so that fossil fuels can unwind the pollution they cause.

Secondly, there should be new climate accountancy rules for accountants and auditors on fossil fuels and pension funds, which would require accountants and auditors to produce Paris-compliant accounts, where assets and activities not aligned with the Paris treaty are written down to zero by 2050 at the latest. I think that would change the valuation of a number of companies. We would see a lot more transparency, really know what was going on, and be able to take better decisions.

Thirdly, there should be new, mandatory requirements on all pension fund managers and trustees to report on whether their portfolios of investments are aligned with Paris or not—really strong transparency and disclosure. Fourthly, there should be new powers for pension regulators, and the Bank of England if required, to challenge funds and other investment operations on their climate risk management. Where that is found wanting, the regulators should be able to take action to ensure proper alignment.

Fifthly, we need to develop a register—probably Government-led—of all the low carbon, green and zero carbon investment opportunities for the capital to go to. We cannot just say disinvest; we must show where investments and that capital should go. The good news is that there are a huge number of very attractive low carbon and zero carbon investment opportunities in this country and around the world, so we can ensure that our pensioners of the future get the pensions that they need and that those pensions are far less risky because they will be based on climate-friendly assets.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman seems to be advocating a reduction of investment in energy companies. Does he recognise—I am sure he does from his time as Energy Minister—that many such companies, and particularly the larger international oil companies, are investing in new technologies, cleaner technologies and research and development in renewable energy?

Sir Edward Davey: I am not trying to get rid of energy companies; I am trying to get them to switch. We have a couple of examples of big energy companies switching out of fossil fuels and into green technology. Some have done that around the world successfully. Unfortunately, most of the majors to which the hon. Gentleman refers have not done so on any serious level at all. I did some calculations that showed on average their capital expenditure on green technology in the last decade or so is just 1.3% of their total spend. That is just not serious. I hear what he says, but we must get those energy companies to take this far more seriously. Some are beginning to shift, but we need to show that they must step up to the plate.

We have a climate emergency, and it is great that we are seeing people—young people in particular—coming out and protesting. I celebrate what they have done. There is a thirst for Governments to take action. The question is: are our actions up to it? The only response to what people are arguing for and what the science says is a quite dramatic systemic change. In the disinvest and reinvest approach and the policies I have outlined, I want to argue for something very radical but practical.

Those who go to the City and talk to pension funds such as Legal & General, Allianz and Axa will find that a number of them are doing what I am talking about. Those who talk to the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, as I did four weeks ago, will find that he is absolutely on to this case. There is a coalition of willing people in the City who want to go this way; it is just that this Government and Parliament are behind the City and the regulators. We must get in front of them, because they want us to show true leadership. Let us today give that leadership.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, in view of the importance that people rightly attach to this issue, a large number of people want to speak. Accordingly, I will have to impose a time limit on speeches of five minutes. I may have to reduce that later.

2.47 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on obtaining this debate, which is relevant, timely and of key interest to many Members across the House, not least those who are members of the parliamentary pension scheme. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and highlight that I used to run the pensions business for a significant UK asset manager before coming to the House and that, along with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), I am one of the three current Members of the scheme’s board of trustees.

I have three points to highlight. First, this is a challenge for all pension funds not just in the UK but across the world. The rules and regulations by which pension funds are governed have changed significantly, not least under this Conservative Government. The Law Commission reports of 2014 and 2017 are relevant: 2014 was the first time that pension funds had in effect an obligation to what people are arguing for and what the science says. The 2017 changes allowed for some social investment. The parliamentary guidance to which my hon. Friend the Pensions Minister referred, which came in last autumn, made a significant change in requiring trustees to report, as part of the statement of investment principles, on the portfolio’s effect on climate change and what trustees intended to do about that. That is the background.
The parliamentary pension fund is conscious of its obligations under the 2018 regulations. We have had several meetings and discussions with different advisers to consider how we might best tackle the challenges and how to amend our statement of investment principles. The three existing Members who are trustees—me, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East—had a separate meeting, and we also met one of the world’s leading green asset managers to look at what sort of investment vehicles are available to schemes that want to take a greener approach.

That leads to my second point. In trying to make a pension scheme greener, we have to be honest about the scale of the ambition that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton set out. I think I heard him correctly when he said that pension schemes should invest in new technologies to try to be carbon free. I challenge that gently, because I do not believe there is a company in the world that is completely carbon free and has never used a single vehicle, train or aeroplane that uses fossil fuels or any form of heater or boiler that runs on gas. It is virtually impossible, at this stage, to measure the complete carbon footprint of any business of significant scale.

As an illustration of the proof of that pudding, which shows the challenge for individuals, the chairman of Ecotricity—who has headquarters in the constituency which shows the challenge for individuals, the chairman of Ecotricity—whose headquarters is in the constituency of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Stroud, is an outspoken champion of everything green, but he clocks up a huge number of air miles every year as a global ambassador for sport, for some United Nations subsidiary. My guess is that he does not travel economy class. There are challenges at an individual and at a corporate level.

Sir Edward Davey: To clarify, I was focusing on ensuring that companies were compliant with the Paris treaty. That does not mean that they need to be zero carbon now—that would be impossible—but they need to be on a pathway that is Paris compliant, and that is the case for many companies already. We just need fossil fuel companies and others to catch up.

Richard Graham: I am grateful for the clarification. I think the right hon. Gentleman understands that, from a personal investor or a pension fund investment point of view, finding an entirely fossil fuel-free investment would be very challenging.

My third point is that there is a challenge not just for pension funds, but for the wider financial sector. The most innovative green energy projects in the UK, particularly those looking at how we can mobilise some of the most powerful tidal streams in the world—including wave technology in the north of Scotland and cases being worked on in Cornwall, Hampshire and the west coast of Wales—are not easily accessible investment vehicles and are not at the scale that a significant pension fund could easily invest in. It would be useful to look at challenges around some investment regulations, including how major investors, such as large insurance companies that manage huge pension assets, could be allowed to invest more money almost in creating businesses to invest in new technologies.

I am conscious that time is running out, so let me move to my final point.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry; the hon. Gentleman has exceeded his time limit.

2.53 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

Pension funds are hugely important—they are also personally important to me—because they are major stakeholders in the UK and global investment markets, with £2.8 trillion invested in assets and more than £90 billion invested a year on behalf of 84% of UK workers. That is why leadership is so important in this sector. In 2015, when I was a councillor at Warwickshire County Council, I wanted the council to show leadership and go fossil fuel free in recognition of what the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and several other major investors had done at that time by diverting from the fossil-fuel industry into the renewable sector. I felt that if that necessity was recognised by the once all-important Rockefeller company and family, we should look to follow. Sadly, that motion was put to the vote and lost.

The motion failed because of the rules of the local government pension scheme, the LGPS, which are set nationally but administered locally. Its responsibilities include managing the investment funds within a statutory framework. The 2014 Law Commission report on “Pension Funds: Financial and Ethical Investments” concluded:

“Where trustees think ethical or environmental, social or governance (ESG) issues are financially material they should take them into account. However, while the pursuit of a financial return should be the predominant concern of pension trustees, the law is sufficiently flexible to allow other, subordinate, concerns to be taken into account.”

For me, that is important. More recently, I checked the Local Government Association legal advice, which says that “the precise choice of investment may be influenced by wider social, ethical or environmental considerations, so long as that does not risk material financial detriment to the fund.”

Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, recently wrote about that. He said meeting the Paris targets “requires a massive reallocation of capital. If some companies and industries fail to adjust they will fail to exist.”

He pointed out that fossil fuel investments carry major financial risks since overvalued carbon assets may be left stranded. This stranding could cause a global wealth loss of $1 trillion to $4 trillion, posing major risks to pension funds.

One does not have to look just in the UK or at what happened with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The California Public Employees’ Retirement System and the California State Teachers’ Retirement System divested themselves of any holdings of thermal coal in 2015. Norway’s sovereign wealth fund is dumping investments in firms that explore for oil and gas. This strategy shift, on the back of advice from the country’s central bank, will affect 1.2% of its holdings, worth about 66 billion Norwegian krone, which is a significant amount. According to Norway’s Minister of Finance:

“The objective is to reduce the vulnerability of our common wealth to a permanent oil price decline. Hence, it is more accurate to sell companies which explore and produce oil and gas, rather than selling a broadly diversified energy sector.”
More recently, the Environment Agency decarbonised its £2.9 billion pension fund by increasing climate positive investments, reducing its exposure to the coal industry by 90% and greatly reducing its exposure to oil and gas. More parochially, Southwark Council has moved £450 million into passive funds that track low-carbon and fossil-free indices produced by MSCI. It has invested £30 million in the Glenmont Partners clean energy fund III, which invests in western European wind and solar companies. For me, that shows great leadership and is to be commended.

Sadly, according to the 2018 report of the parliamentary contributory pension fund, its largest holding is in BP. The fund has no positive investments that are committed to bringing about a zero-carbon world, which is a real shame. Hence, 244 serving and former MPs have signed the Divest Parliament pledge calling on the trustees to phase out investments in fossil fuel companies; I have signed that pledge. As if to underline this move, the Church of England’s General Synod—its parliament—voted 347 to 4 in favour of removing its holdings in coal. That type of leadership is widespread and it is something we should follow.

In following the leadership of others, and going for socially, environmentally and economically advantageous investments, let us ensure that we are Paris compliant. Almost 20 years ago, BP rebranded as Beyond Petroleum. The fund has no positive investments that are committed to bringing about a zero-carbon world, which is a real shame. Hence, 244 serving and former MPs have signed the Divest Parliament pledge calling on the trustees to phase out investments in fossil fuel companies; I have signed that pledge. As if to underline this move, the Church of England’s General Synod—its parliament—voted 347 to 4 in favour of removing its holdings in fossil fuels. That type of leadership is widespread and it is something we should follow.

In following the leadership of others, and going for socially, environmentally and economically advantageous investments, let us ensure that we are Paris compliant. Almost 20 years ago, BP rebranded as Beyond Petroleum.

Lord Deben, chair of the Committee on Climate Change, said that the CCC had been deliberately cautious in drawing up its 2050 target and had deliberately excluded the impact of technological innovations, as we heard earlier, which could hasten the UK’s progress towards a net zero target in ways that cannot currently be anticipated. So our progress in meeting our environmental targets directly depends on the prosperity of our green economy.

We know that the personal is increasingly becoming the political, and vice versa. Few things would more erode the channels of communication between Parliament and the public than our asking one thing of them while tacitly endorsing something else ourselves. We cannot just talk the talk; we also have to walk the walk. If we are to work alongside our constituents and harness their energy in eliminating net UK emissions, it is vital that we divest the parliamentary pension fund of fossil fuel investments. I therefore welcome the recent pledge by the fund trustees to “prepare a climate change policy” and to “show ambition” in formulating a responsible business plan that is in line with the principles being discussed today. As we have heard, this is not just about the parliamentary fund but about the broader symbolic implications of such a step.

The Governor of the Bank of England and the Environmental Audit Committee have publicly warned of the dangers of over-exposure to carbon assets in the light of the international drive towards net zero. Hon. Members will be familiar with the 2006 Stern review and the pivotal role it has played in shaping understanding of the interaction between climate change and the economy. Lord Stern recently suggested that the economic models under which current projections are produced systematically underestimate the economic implications of climate change and its effects. A study published last year by the co-director of the Oxford University climate econometrics project describes the catastrophic economic consequences of a 2° C jump in the global temperature, and how, beyond that headline figure, the poorest countries will suffer the direst economic effects.

Since the introduction of auto-enrolment in 2012, the percentage of UK workers in a pension scheme has mushroomed. Ignoring the effects of investment strategies really is disastrous short-termism. The parliamentary fund needs to demonstrate the beautiful truth that long-term investment strategies are not incompatible—far from it. In fact, they can form a fabulous virtuous circle, and one that I hope will be beneficial to us all.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. To give people time to adjust their speeches, I say now that I will reduce the time limit to four minutes after the next speech.

3.3 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this important debate, secured by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). It follows the Environmental Audit Committee’s inquiry into green finance, which he clearly read because his recommendations seem to mirror our own. It is good to see Committee members who served on that inquiry in the Chamber.
The physical impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, will pose increasing economic risks for a range of businesses and investments, from food and farming to infrastructure, homebuilding and insurance. In the UK alone, climate change is projected to increase the risk that business assets and operations are damaged and disrupted by flooding, degrade some of our most productive agricultural land, to reduce water supplies, to increase the frequency and intensity of heatwaves, and to stress transportation, energy and water infrastructure. There are a great many risks for investors to consider.

For instance, climate change may result in liability risks when those who suffer losses as a result of climate change take legal action to recover damages from those who can be found responsible. For example, the city of New York is currently seeking to recover costs from BP, ExxonMobil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Shell as a result of flooding. Transition risks could also be faced by companies in high-carbon sectors that fail to diversify and adapt to policies introduced in response to the Paris climate change agreement. Firms that do not make a timely transition and remain over-invested in climate-changing activities could face costly regulatory action, suffer reputational damage, or see their assets become stranded as carbon prices rise. Our inquiry found several examples of stranded assets, such as oil refineries or fracking infrastructure. A Bank of England paper published in 2016 warned that “a sudden, unexpected tightening of carbon emission policies could lead to a disorderly re-pricing of carbon-intensive assets”.

These are real challenges for pension providers and pension investors.

Our Committee heard about a range of worrying practices in the pension industry, including the fiduciary duty of pension scheme trustees often being misinterpreted as a duty to maximise short-term returns; remuneration for investment consultants and fund managers encouraging a pursuit of short-term returns rather than long-term value creation; and a tendency to under-invest in physical assets, technology innovation and employees’ skills in preference for nearer-term gains from financial mergers, acquisitions or restructuring. In the context of our climate change risk, we want none of those things.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is really good to hear hon. Members talk about climate change and greenhouse gases, but there are in fact nine planetary boundaries, of which greenhouse gases are one. I wonder whether people understand that it is entirely possible that we save the planet from climate change yet kill ourselves through eight of the other planetary boundaries, two of which we are in the red for. Is it not the case that financial markets, pension schemes and so on actually need to see their remit as wider than just greenhouse gases, also covering a range of other areas, including biodiversity and carbon?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely. A range of factors, including air quality and the insect population and pollinators, should be taken into account. It is not just about fossil fuels, but as the debate mainly concerns fossil fuels and climate change, I will concentrate on those. I recently led a debate on insect populations. It is good that we are looking at all of that in the round.

There are structural incentives in the UK for maximising short-term returns over long-term investments, which are much more climate-sensitive. The Government should clarify that pension schemes and company directors have a fiduciary duty to protect long-term value and should consider environmental risks in the light of that. Some pension companies are taking that up, and investors are also looking for better, fossil-free pension options. A 2017 YouGov poll for Good Money Week found that more than half of 18 to 34-years-olds—the pensioners of tomorrow—would like fossil-free investments offered as standard.

We need to make progress, and the Government need to bring in stricter rules. The Committee found that the current rules are that trustees or governance committees legally must have good reason to think that scheme members would share their concerns, and that decisions should not involve a risk of detriment to the fund. However, the European Commission’s action plan on sustainable finance proposes that institutional investors and investment managers should consult their beneficiaries on their sustainability preferences and reflect those in their investment decision making, regardless of whether they are financially material. The European Commission plan states that “institutional investors and asset managers do not sufficiently disclose to their clients if and how they consider sustainability factors in their decision-making. End-investors may, therefore, not receive the full information they need, should they want to take into account sustainability-related issues in their investment decisions.”

I call on the Government to adopt the action plan in full; the Minister intervened earlier to say that the Government have only partially adopted it.

Pension savers should be given the greatest opportunity to engage with decisions about where their money is invested. As I said, younger generations want fully fossil-free pension options. Divesting from fossil fuels makes sense not just in terms of ethics and the climate, but as a sound long-term financial strategy. As soon as I joined the parliamentary pension scheme, I also became a supporter of Divest Parliament. According to the latest annual report, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said, the fund includes stakes in BP at £7.33 million, Shell at £6.6 million, Rio Tinto at £3.67 million and Total at £2.93 million. Our own funds are being invested in those companies. It is time our own trustees heard our voices in this debate and in this place, divested our pension funds and reinvested in renewables and clean tech for our future and for the planet.

3.10 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): In 2018, the Government said they would update the law to require trustees to consider the impact of their investment on a changing environment. That has now been implemented. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing this debate. He clearly set out the changing environment in the world of fossil fuel companies. Pensions funds are investments for many years. Our job in this place is to ensure that people who invest in a pension fund, but who do not necessarily have the power to decide where their money is invested, can be confident that their pension is secure and will provide the retirement that they expect.
Is a pension fund in a fossil fuel a sound investment? Evidence suggests it is not. The Government, for example, are introducing a ban on carbon-fuelled new cars in 2040. Calor, which I met last year, has committed to 100% BioLPG by 2040. This month, a whole week went by in which no energy generation came from coal-fired energy plants. Our focus should be on ensuring a secure future for pension fund savers, and investment in fossil fuel does not provide that. It should also be on the choices that pension fund owners want to make. Many employees have no choice in where their pension contributions end up, and increasing numbers of people would be horrified if they thought that the funds they held were invested in fossil fuels, when at home they do all they can to reduce their carbon footprint.

I heard what was said earlier about the need to invest in companies for research and development to provide cleaner and carbon-free fuels. I am sure that, given a choice, people would welcome that, but they need to be given a choice about where their funds end up, and they need their funds to be secure and invested in something that they feel comfortable with. The Government have a real opportunity to support employees and to ensure greater transparency in where their money ends up and where the pension funds put their money, as well as greater choice in pension markets. Empowering consumers will have a greater impact when it comes to caring for our natural environment.

3.13 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing this debate. I think he slightly understated the carbon bubble in his opening remarks. The carbon bubble—basically the evaluation of assets that we know will never be realised—is not something that might burst in the not too distant future. It will inevitably burst because energy companies have systematically overvalued their assets and put them on their balance sheets. Not only will the historical overvaluing be in question, but all the valuing for the future will be in question, basically in line with where we now know we have got to go on net zero in our economies.

I prefer to call the carbon bubble a carbon boil. I am afraid the image is rather poor, but what we can do with a boil is lance it before it bursts, and that is the exercise we should be engaged in right now. The suggestions that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton put forward for doing that were sound. However, pension funds are complicit in the carbon boil/bubble because, by and large, they consider their fiduciary duty to be about getting the best for their pensioners over the next few years. They do not generally look at the long term, and do not think they are required to do so as far as their funds are concerned. The Governor of the Bank of England recently described it as “the tragedy of the horizon”.

Richard Graham: To reassure the hon. Gentleman and others, it is perfectly possible for pension fund trustees to take the view that their fiduciary duty of obtaining good returns to deliver the pensions expected is not incompatible with taking into account huge amounts of other issues, including climate change. It is important that we all recognise that. We have a duty to look at that as well.

Dr Whitehead: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that some pension funds are beginning to take a different view. Indeed, that different view is becoming more possible, but the general consideration of the fiduciary duty remains a short-term gain for pensioners in the funds. Of course, the people setting out on their working lives will not get the benefit of those pension funds for 30 or 40 years. During that time inevitably we have to move to the net zero carbon economy. It is therefore essential that pension funds have a duty to look at the long term.

Guy Opperman: I want to help the hon. Gentleman on one point. He needs to understand that the ESG regulations are not voluntary, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) suggested. They are mandatory. If the trustees fail to follow them, specific sanctions follow.

Dr Whitehead: My understanding of the 2018 regulations is that it is mandatory for people to look at such things, but not mandatory for people to do things. That is the difference. In fact, I welcomed the regulations.

Pension funds should in future have a duty to protect the long-term value of the funds as well as consider the short-term issues of making money for their pensioners. We therefore need to clarify in law the fact that pension funds have a duty to protect the long-term value of the funds. Indeed, a recommendation that the Environmental Audit Committee made in its 2018 report has not been acted on, even though those regulations were introduced. That is something we need to move to urgently.

Having said that pension funds tend to invest in bonds and various other things that are primarily about energy bonds, on the assumption that there will be value, which we know will not be there in future, there is then the question of moving towards investment in things that do make a difference to climate change. Pension funds have a genuine problem in terms of the Solvency II regs, which tend to guide pension funds away from investing in the schemes that are capital-intensive up front and revenue less intensive behind, that are at the heart of the green investment revolution.

We need to do two things: first, make it much easier for pension funds to invest in long-term schemes, and secondly, ensure that they have a duty to ensure that they do not invest in short-term schemes. I have addressed the practical aspects of what pension schemes have done. I have not touched on the moral aspect. We simply have to leave dirty energy in the ground. We have got to invest in clean energy for the future, and pension funds ought to be at the front of that. If pension managers take that view in addition to the legal responsibilities that they have, I am sure they will go a long way to helping the green revolution succeed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. To get the three remaining speakers in and leave enough time for the Front Benchers, and a moment of two at the end for
the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), I shall have to reduce the time limit further to three minutes.

3.20 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing this important debate. I could not agree more that we must harness the power of capitalism as a force for good—because it can be a force for good. I agree that wholesale nationalisation is the wrong approach to the emergency. It will not provide the creativity, investment or innovation that we need to tackle what is a huge problem.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) that it is important to give people information, so that they can make informed choices. They will want to know not only that their pension investments are working to secure them income in retirement, but that those investments are a force for good in the world. That is especially true when people are making so many sacrifices at home to reduce their carbon footprint.

I pay tribute to the Minister who, I know, completely gets this issue. In an article in *The Times* today he talks about the potential to be gained from unlocking the huge investments in pension funds to tackle climate change, and he makes a good case. Picking up on that, I ask him to work with his colleagues, particularly in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and to look at the opportunity to harness through local industrial strategies the potential for investment by local authority pension schemes in clean growth.

We have set clean growth at the heart of our economic growth in Cornwall. Cornwall Council sits on a pension fund well in excess of £1 billion. Many people in Cornwall would like to think that the council was making safe, wise decisions by creating well insulated, environmentally friendly new homes and communities that are affordable for people to live in. They would want it to invest in the excellent, growing, high-tech, clean growth industries in Cornwall, as well as in existing organisations such as Kensa, which is Europe’s favourite supplier of ground-source heat pumps. There are plenty of organisations that would deliver good returns for the pension fund in Cornwall, and which would use the money locally for the benefit of local people. There is an opportunity through the industrial strategy for the local growth strategies to link the need for finance with the need for local growth.

I ask the Minister to bear in mind what has been said today and give local authorities clearer guidance, so that they can meet their responsibilities and use the huge opportunity of their pension funds to deliver the clean growth and decent homes that people in their communities want.

3.22 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing this important debate.

I commend the climate change protesters who have taken to our streets in recent weeks, including many schoolchildren from my constituency who will be out again on Friday. They have succeeded in putting climate change where it should always have been, at the top of the political agenda. They are right to protest and they are right not to rest until the action that we need is taken and carbon emissions are falling.

It is good that Parliament has declared a climate emergency, but we need action now that is commensurate with an emergency. Divestment is critical to that. One of the essential systemic changes that we need to make is to look at the big flows of investment finance in our economy, divert them away from harmful, polluting and exploitative fossil fuels and reinvest them to scale up sustainable zero-carbon change.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. There are hundreds of billions of pounds in UK pension schemes, and asset...
owners sit on top of the investment scheme without realising the financial power that they wield. Should not it be made mandatory, so that there can be a transition to a low-carbon economy, for them to examine the situation and take action on the climate risks?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To my mind, divestment is a no-brainer. As far as we can we must keep fossil fuels in the ground. We do not have the luxury of doing anything else. Yet for as long as the fossil fuel giants can draw down big investment finance they will keep extracting and selling their damaging products. As long as the development of sustainable alternatives is starved of investment finance, limiting their availability and keeping their cost high, consumers will remain addicted to fossil fuels. It is that simple.

Divestment is a big, systematic change that we can make now. I pay tribute to both local councils in my constituency, Lambeth and Southwark, which were among the first local authorities to divest their pension funds from fossil fuels. I am proud of their commitment, which shows that divestment is completely possible within the strict fiduciary duties of pension fund trustees. More than that, retaining funds in fossil fuels is increasing the risk of those investments over time. At City Hall Sadiq Khan is also showing great leadership on divestment, divesting the Greater London Authority’s assets, working to support boroughs and encouraging them to divest.

The parliamentary pension scheme remains invested in fossil fuels. Five of the top 20 investments of our pension fund are in fossil fuel companies. The pension fund trustees have been far too slow to react to calls for divestment and are still refusing to do so, despite the fact that more than a third of MPs have written to them about it. The divestment of our pension funds is a straightforward leadership action that Parliament should take. No increased risk is entailed and in fact the opposite is true. The climate change emergency demands it.

Finally, we need the law to drive a further change in divestment. Although arguably the law currently requires pension fund trustees to invest in line with the Paris agreement, new legislation is needed to clarify and strengthen the duty. Reporting of fossil fuel-based investments should be mandatory and there should be a duty on all investors to report on the alignment of their portfolios in relation to the Paris agreement. This cannot be left to chance. We will not tackle climate change by retaining the status quo and fiddling around the edges. We need systemic change and it must start with our own leadership and a legislative framework that drives investment finance nationally and globally away from fossil fuels and towards the sustainable investment we need.

3.29 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I congratulate you on managing to fit in nine Back-Bench speeches, as well as the one by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and several interventions. That demonstrates the importance of this issue to hon. Members across the House and their constituents.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton on securing the debate, and on framing it in such an interesting way that enabled us to consider both the ethical and the financial risks of investment in fossil fuels. As well as risks, however, there are immense investment opportunities. We have an important chance to get this right and to build a cleaner, greener and more sustainable future for us all.

The subject is of considerable concern to many of our constituents—I have certainly received emails about it, and people have come to my surgery to speak to me, which is always a demonstration of the importance that people attach to an issue. The divestment campaign has been running for a considerable time. In 2014 there was a successful campaign at the University of Glasgow in my constituency, since when the university has made a concerted effort to divest away from polluting and fossil fuel technologies.

As the extremity of climate events increases, the urgency becomes clearer and the momentum behind the campaign continues. Hon. Members have mentioned that energy companies and other such industries are willing to engage with that momentum, but they also need support and incentives. The declaration of a climate emergency is crucial because it helps to reframe that policy debate. We in Parliament have declared a climate emergency, civil society is doing so, and Glasgow University and Glasgow City Council have done so. The Scottish Government and the SNP have also made that declaration, but I think I am right in saying that the UK Government have not done so yet. They may have accepted the motion that was passed but they have not yet declared a climate emergency, and that is a missed opportunity to show leadership.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that consistent, reliable policy frameworks from Governments are essential when encouraging investors to take up the ethical investment opportunities that I know they are keen to take up?

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend is right, and I hope we will hear that point from the Minister.

Difficult decisions will have to be made. The Scottish Government have halted their plans to cut departure tax at airports, and the First Minister said in the Chamber that we will have to look again at our stance on the expansion of Heathrow. Those are the ways that we can begin to make that just transition, and that is the importance of the Divest Parliament pledge, which I and the vast majority of SNP Members have signed and are happy to endorse.

David Duguid: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I am conscious of the time, and as the Chair said, we must ensure there is time for the Minister and shadow Minister to respond.

We must lead by example, and starting with our own pension funds is one of the best ways to do that. Like the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), and others, I hope that the trustees are listening to this debate.

It is right to place an emphasis on both the ethical and the financial risks. The ethical risks are there for us all to see. The impact of over-reliance on fossil fuels over the years most affects people in developing countries, whose consumption of fossil fuels has been the least, but who are feeling the impact of climate change first
and hardest. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) said, this is not just about financial prudence; there is also a financial logic to switching investments towards clean, green and diversified technologies. Even without a reduction in emissions for reasons of climate change, fossil fuels are a finite resource, and one day they will run out. We must make the transition.

While we still use fossil fuels, we must do so as cleanly as possible. That means investment in things like carbon capture and storage, on which the UK Government have again been woefully lacking. Governments have a responsibility to create a climate-friendly investment environment. The Scottish Government are doing their part with solid environmental and ethical considerations and procurement guidance, as well as the establishment of the Just Transition Commission, which will seize those transition opportunities while ensuring that communities are not left behind as they were during the deindustrialisation of the 1980s.

The UK Government must play their part, and we heard interesting proposals from the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton about aligning decisions to the Paris agreement targets. I suggest that aligning decisions to the sustainable development goals would also make a lot of sense. In reserved areas, the Government should fully operationalise carbon capture technologies and accelerate action to decarbonise the gas grid. They should redesign vehicle and tax incentives to support industry, and commit to adhering to future EU emissions standards, irrespective of our future status within the EU. They should reduce VAT on energy efficiency and home improvements, and support the renewables industry more generally. All that would create a more incentivised investment environment for new, clean and green technologies.

We should listen to the future generations and climate change school protesters. If they wish to claim a pension in a sustainable environment in decades to come, that will require action now to tackle climate change and build a financially viable and sustainable pension fund. For them we must seize this opportunity and look not just at financial and ethical risks, but at the financial and ethical opportunities of a cleaner, greener and more just world.

3.35 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) for securing this vital debate. I also thank the nine Members who made speeches, as well as those who intervened.

It is not every day that I agree with the Liberal Democrats, but we certainly have common ground on this issue. We are in a climate emergency, and when we talk about moving towards a greener economy, we must be clear that the time for debate and discussion alone has passed. It is now time for clear, concrete and urgent action. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) so powerfully argued, we must make no mistake: this is a climate emergency; this is a crisis.

One could argue that climate change has never been so prominent in public consciousness and political discourse. Despite the Brexit-related dramas in Parliament, which still continue, between 15 and 25 April, climate change was high on the news agenda in response to Extinction Rebellion protests in London, a major BBC documentary presented by Sir David Attenborough, and the visit to London of a Swedish schoolgirl. They led the way for many of us.

Over the past 12 months, according to pollsters, the environment has risen in public concern. In a YouGov poll conducted on 29 and 30 April, 24% of people placed the environment among the top issues facing the country—about the same level as concern about the economy and immigration. That is a stunning development. We know from our postbags the levels of concern among the public about the climate emergency. Nothing short of a major transformation from fossil fuels to renewables will be good enough. Changing the ways that pension funds invest will not solve the crisis on its own; it must be part of a much wider approach—a new green deal, or a green industrial revolution. We have made some progress but, my God, we need to make considerably more if we are genuinely to tackle this emergency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) highlighted the fact that the Labour-led Southwark Council has moved £450 million into passive funds that track low-carbon and fossil-free indices. It has also invested £30 million in Glenmont’s green energy fund, which invests in western European wind and solar companies. Many trade unions—I declare an interest as a member of Unison—have produced excellent and accessible guides to divesting away from fossil fuels, and I know that has been welcomed by representatives on local government pension committees and schemes up and down the country.

Parliament has started to take this issue more seriously and put its own House in order. In June last year, 11 hon. Members, including the shadow Chancellor, called for Cambridge University to remove its £377 million fossil fuel investments. In addition, 244 serving and former MPs have signed the Divest Parliament pledge, calling on the trustees to phase out investments in fossil fuel companies. The trustees are developing a climate change investment policy, but not quickly enough, as highlighted powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). We want that policy to commit to phasing out investment in fossil fuel companies in the earliest timeframe possible and to reinvest the money in funds aligned to the Paris agreement.

This country’s pension assets, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington, total some £2.8 trillion. Pension savings should be at the forefront of the fight against climate change. Pension savers have money invested for the long term, so it is particularly exposed to climate risks, as powerfully argued right across the Chamber. This concern is now relevant to more of us than ever.

Given the clear threat that climate change poses, we would all hope that it would be the norm for pension schemes to manage the risks. Unfortunately, research from the charity ShareAction finds that, for many, their retirement savings are unlikely to be sufficiently protected against climate risks. In a survey of some of the UK’s largest defined-contribution corporate pension schemes, just two of the 15 participating schemes had changed their default investment strategy specifically to reduce the exposure of employees’ savings to climate change.
risks. Although ShareAction found that a handful of schemes are considering further policy developments in this respect, the fact that a gulf exists in the strategies of schemes means that workers face a lottery from one job to the next as to whether their savings are sufficiently protected against climate change.

As the Minister stated in an intervention, the new pensions investment regulations, in force from October 2019 and to be strengthened in 2020, go some way towards addressing the issue. Scheme trustees will need to update policies to show how they take climate change into consideration as a financial risk. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) argued powerfully, we need to go considerably further.

Financial regulators have a major part to play. Trustees in charge of managing schemes need enhanced guidance from the Pensions Regulator on how best to manage climate risks. The Financial Conduct Authority, in charge of regulating contract-based schemes, needs to provide clarity on the need for consideration of and reporting on climate risks, through both investment and stewardship, to ensure that no savers face weaker protections because of the scheme in which their employer happens to have enrolled them.

Greater transparency about the actions that schemes are taking to manage the risks should result in better decisions being made.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point about transparency. A large reform is going on in the audit industry at the moment. Does he agree that there is an opportunity for us to look at the whole of financial services and financial infrastructure and look at how we value investments, so that we value intangibles along with tangibles and ensure that our environmental and sustainability investments are getting their appropriate value? This is not just a trade-off between short-term returns and long-term investments; we can achieve both if they are valued correctly.

Mike Amesbury: That is a very good point, which I will come on to.

Pension schemes should be required to report on their management of climate risks in line with the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures. Transparency could also be enhanced by mandating scheme member representation—I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) argued for this—on the governance boards of the new auto-enrolment schemes, as well as by requiring pension schemes to consult their members on key policies.

We need to send clear signals that tackling climate change and other environmental, social and governance risks is not distinct from the core purpose of financial markets, but an integral part of it, as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) argued in his intervention. Of course, as we divest from fossil fuels, we must ramp up investment in clean and green technology. Labour has set out plans to fit 1.75 million homes with electricity-generating solar photovoltaic panels, creating thousands of quality skilled jobs across the UK. That is a Labour green deal that will shift energy generation via renewables to 85% by 2030. It will provide a major boost to an industry that is still recovering from the effects of the coalition Government’s ill thought out slashing of feed-in tariffs, which was such a blow to a growing and vital industry.

Anna McMorrin: Does my hon. Friend agree that to really address this issue, we need legislation like that in Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which is transforming how the public sector takes decisions? Legislation like that could and would address this very issue if we had it in the UK.

Mike Amesbury: I do agree with that point, which was powerfully made.

Labour will transform corporate environmental responsibility by making compliance with key environmental criteria a condition of firms listing on the stock exchange, so we will be applying that more broadly. Of course, to deliver the change needed to respond to this emergency, all parties need to show leadership.

Does the Minister agree that we are in a crisis, an emergency, and that nothing less than transformational, revolutionary change is needed? If that is the case, does the Minister believe that rolling out the red carpet for the current President of the United States, who is perhaps the most high-profile and influential denier of climate science in the world today, sends the right message? Will the Minister look at giving further strength to the ESG regulations? They are a welcome step forward, as we have already said, but we could go considerably further. Will the Minister offer Government support for the parliamentary schemes divesting from not only fossil fuels but environmentally damaging investments more broadly and doing so as quickly as possible? Finally, if the Government support the move away from fossil fuels, why do they continue to support the fracking revolution, as highlighted in their party’s 2017 manifesto? We need more than warm words. We need emergency action now.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): This Parliament accepts that there is a climate emergency, and this debate, which I am delighted so many colleagues have embraced this afternoon, has focused on the following key issues: the change that clearly is taking place in our climate; the role of the consumer; the choices that are available to the individual parties that we are dealing with; and, ultimately, the role of capitalism and its ability to assist in addressing these particular problems.

We should trumpet the success of successive Governments of different persuasions, leading up to the coalition and this Government, in leading the way in the G20 and reducing our CO₂, and we should celebrate the quadrupling of our renewable capacity, but we clearly must do more. We should celebrate the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said, on the May bank holiday Britain had burned no coal for electricity for a week—the longest period without coal since the industrial revolution.

Although we celebrate these good things, they are patently not enough. Although we will plant more forests, recycle more and, crucially, try to engage our
consumers, our citizens, our constituents to change their behaviour, we do, I suggest, need capitalism to save the day. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) that we need to urge local authorities to focus on the clean growth strategy that has been set out by the Government to address the way we do housing and the way we do energy on a localised basis. I believe very strongly—any Conservative will make the case—that capitalism is a force for good, because we need technological innovation to solve the climate change issues, and innovative start-ups will be needed to address the access to capital and the changes that are required.

David Duguid: Many hon. Members have spoken about the need for transparency regarding the kinds of companies that are being invested in. Does the Minister agree that that transparency should include the work already done by large oil and gas companies to invest in the innovation he is talking about? It is not only small start-ups that do this innovation; the large companies with large resources behind them are already investing in it heavily. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) mentioned, the 1.3% invested by the 13 or so companies that are part of the oil and gas climate initiative works out at approximately $100 million a year. That is a very large number, even though the percentage sounds small.

Guy Opperman: I accept my hon. Friend’s point. The crucial point is that natural gas had been one of the biggest parts of reducing carbon dioxide in the electricity sector. Hydrogen derived from natural gas will decarbonise heating for homes and transport. The large companies are leading the way on carbon capture and storage. We must work with them to ensure that the successes, which we all want to see, continue.

We can see the changes that are taking place. Individual companies must answer for themselves. Last year, Shell, one of the largest companies that we are debating, agreed to link its executive pay to its carbon emission targets, in direct response to particular shareholders. The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Sarah Newton) mentioned, the 1.3% invested by the 13 or so companies that are part of the oil and gas climate initiative works out at approximately $100 million a year. That is a very large number, even though the percentage sounds small.

Several hon. Members rose—

Guy Opperman: I accept my hon. Friend’s point. The crucial point is that natural gas had been one of the biggest parts of reducing carbon dioxide in the electricity sector. Hydrogen derived from natural gas will decarbonise heating for homes and transport. The large companies are leading the way on carbon capture and storage. We must work with them to ensure that the successes, which we all want to see, continue.

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Guy Opperman: I accept my hon. Friend’s point. The crucial point is that natural gas had been one of the biggest parts of reducing carbon dioxide in the electricity sector. Hydrogen derived from natural gas will decarbonise heating for homes and transport. The large companies are leading the way on carbon capture and storage. We must work with them to ensure that the successes, which we all want to see, continue.

We can see the changes that are taking place. Individual companies must answer for themselves. Last year, Shell, one of the largest companies that we are debating, agreed to link its executive pay to its carbon emission targets, in direct response to particular shareholders. The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), would be here if she could, to make the case for the Government’s clean growth strategy and the green agenda. Like her, I urge individual consumers—anybody who has a particular pension—to make the case to their trustees as to how that is being invested.

Several hon. Members rose—

Guy Opperman: I am going to make some progress and then I will try to take the greatest hits—bear with me one second.

I accept that the technological changes require capital, long-term thinking and a lack of political agenda. I strongly believe that the pension industry has those attributes. I urge the House to accept that the Government’s regulations—namely the ESG regulations, which come in this year, but were passed in September 2018—which require a pension fund to update its statement of investment principles and take into account environmental, social and governance regulations, are key to the change to the strategic progress of investment.

To address the point made by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), those occupational pension schemes regulations require that trustees must—the emphasis is on “must”—set out their policies on environmental, social and governance matters, including climate change, and how they engage with the companies in which they invest. Those regulations also introduced a requirement for trustees of DC schemes, where the member bears the financial risk of poor investment decisions, to report on how their investment policies are being put into action and make all of that information publicly available online.

For too long there has been a perception by too many trustees—I am happy to clarify this as a Government Minister—that the environmental practices of the firms they invest in are purely ethical concerns, which they do not need to worry about: that is utterly wrong. Aside from the ethical considerations, there are real financial risks resulting from climate change. With the long-term horizons of pension investing, trustees must now consider that when they set out their investment strategies. Trustees who do not consider those matters will be breaching their statutory and potentially their fiduciary duties not only to current but future members.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) rose—

Guy Opperman: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has not had a chance to speak.

Ben Lake: There is consensus that divestment from fossil fuels makes both financial and environmental sense. Further to the point that the Minister has just made, does he think that those changes will be sufficient to ensure that the industry actually makes that transition, or does he envisage further measures in the future?

Guy Opperman: I will come on to some of those particular points. In terms of regulatory guidance, which has been raised by several hon. Members, there is no doubt that the Pensions Regulator is planning to publish further guidance on managing the climate change risk in advance of those regulations, which come in to place in October. A key point is that non-compliance with those regulations can potentially lead to sanctions from the Pensions Regulator, which is acutely mindful of its obligations and what it needs to do to address this particular point.

As a Government, we will respond shortly to the advice from the Energy and Climate Change Committee on the target for net zero emissions by 2050. That advice was only published two weeks ago. Colleagues will be aware of the 25-year environmental plan, which has been set out in detail. It commits to using resources from nature more sustainably and effectively, and achieving a clean air, water and wildlife approach.

Alex Sobel: The Minister began by saying that Parliament has declared a climate emergency. Do the Government also recognise and declare a climate emergency? His remarks on the recent report from the Energy and Climate Change Committee indicate that the Government must declare a climate emergency.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman and I went into the same Lobby when we voted on that matter. He has heard that the House gave universal support to the
debate that was taking place. I am not here to make policy on behalf of the whole of the Government, but the Government will respond formally to the 2 May report shortly. He will have to bear with us until that stage.

Deidre Brock: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will not give way again, because I have very little time left.

I want to address a couple of points made by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). He asked whether we are creating a coalition of the willing. I strongly suggest that we are. We are working with the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change, ClientEarth, ShareAction—which I have met on several occasions—and the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association. There is a serious amount being done to ensure we are aligned with the Paris agreement. The widespread global commitment to the Paris agreement suggests that trustees have a responsibility to align their investment strategies with its aims.

However, it is fair to say that there is no definitively agreed consensus on what being aligned to those aims of being below 2°C mean for a specific pension fund and its asset allocation. That is why I am delighted to see the initiative of the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change, which is developing a common understanding of what such alignment means for pension schemes, and the Government will work with it on that point.

Green finance is a key priority for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who set up the green finance taskforce which, with the clean growth strategy, will drive economic growth as part of industrial strategy, to ensure that the UK remains a driving force in enabling the global transition to a low-carbon economy. A green finance strategy paper will be launched later this year, which will set out the Government's green finance objectives on an ongoing basis.

I want to talk about consumers. It is absolutely the case that members can make individual choices. They can choose to move their individual pension into a self-selected fund that aligns with their own objectives, such as an ethical fund. We massively support such an approach and feel that it is the right thing to do.

On transparency, which my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) mentioned, the Government intend to announce further transparency measures on the topic of responsible investment in the coming weeks, in respect of the shareholder rights directive. This Government absolutely accept that there is a climate emergency and we are addressing this. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton for bringing forward this vitally important debate, which all of us have engaged with and embraced as the right way forward. I look forward to updating the House on further developments, particularly in October after the regulations kick in.

3.58 pm

Sir Edward Davey: I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate, which has been really good. There is some degree of consensus emerging. I agree with what the Minister said on carbon capture and storage. I was disappointed that the former Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne, got rid of the CCS projects that I had been developing as Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, particularly the gas CCS which was a world-leader. I regret that, because I think it was an extraordinarily bad decision for the gas industry.

I want to return to the issue of consensus. We need to act. I set out a five-point plan today. There were other ideas. I hope the Government will listen to those ideas. While the ESG guidelines are helpful—I know some of the work that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth is putting forward on green finance—I think we have to be bolder and go further. The Minister has heard that today.

In the context of the role of the UK and the City of London internationally, we need to go further. If we can lead from the City of London, we can decarbonise capitalism not only here, but globally. That will be the biggest contribution that Britain can make to tackling global climate change.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered financial and ethical risks of investments in fossil fuel companies by pension funds.
Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered achieving quality information and support for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

It is a true pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I declare an interest as an ambassador for the National Counselling Society. Child sexual abuse in the UK is a public health crisis. The number of victims is simply staggering; 7% of people aged between 16 and 59 report being sexually abused as a child, which equates to more than 2 million survivors in England and Wales alone.

The all-party parliamentary group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which I chair, recently published the results of a six-month inquiry into the impact of abuse, and the support and information that survivors need to recover. Of the 365 survivors who responded, 90% said that their intimate relationships had been negatively affected by abuse, 89% said that their mental health was negatively affected, 72% said that it was damaging to their career, 65% said that their education was affected, and 46% said that it had a detrimental impact on their financial situation.

It is common, if not typical, for mental health conditions triggered by the trauma of childhood sexual abuse to have a detrimental impact on all aspects of a survivor’s life if left untreated. They can cause survivors to fall out of employment, which jeopardises their financial situation and puts a strain on their family life. Some survivors accrue substantial debts while trying to pay for private therapy after they have failed to access appropriate support on the NHS. Others struggle to find jobs in the career they want to pursue, because their education was severely disrupted as a result of missing education because of abuse. For many survivors, the trauma of abuse makes it difficult to develop close trusting relationships.

The APPG’s report recommends that the Government publish an assessment of the economic and social costs of child sexual abuse, as the Home Office has recently done for domestic abuse. Having that information will help policy makers and the public to understand the scale of the issue.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent point. Of course, we have all seen many sufferers of sexual violence live with that for years and years, unable to express it, until a sudden trigger point means that they can come forward and say what has happened. Will she review those trigger points, so we understand them and can encourage them? Can she also tell us what she would recommend to encourage people to come forward as early as possible to discuss such issues? The earlier they are discussed, the easier it will be for the person involved.

Sarah Champion: The hon. Gentleman makes profound points that go to the nub of the argument. If survivors had confidence that the system would support them, I genuinely believe that they would come forward earlier. Early intervention is key—having a few sessions where people are listened to and fundamentally believed, and can then continue with the rest of their lives.

What tends to happen, however, as the hon. Gentleman has alluded to, is that survivors do not have that trust, so it can take decades for them to come forward, if they ever do. As a result, the spectre hanging over them infiltrates every aspect of their life. A trigger can be anything—the same after shave that their abuser was wearing or a feeling of being enclosed in a space—so unless we address the actual issues and recognise that these people are victims of crime, they will not be able to lead their full lives and reach the potential that we all deserve to achieve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate and for her work on the subject across the House, in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber, for which we greatly respect and are proud of her. I met a lovely lady who was repeatedly sexually assaulted in the worst imaginable ways. To say that she still bears the scars is an understatement. The support for her, and too many others like her, was not in place when it should have been. That failure has to stop. Does the hon. Lady agree that the time has come for us in this place to step up and do right by those who have been so terribly wronged? The system needs to be there at the beginning, and now, when they need it most.

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with those sentiments. It is a blessing that MPs such as the hon. Gentleman fight for people when they need it, but it should not come down to an MP fighting for an individual. They pay their taxes. We have a duty to support them. That support should be accessible to everyone as an automatic right.

Survivors told our inquiry that the impact of trauma caused by childhood sexual abuse is not widely recognised by professionals, which can make it hard to get the support they need. One survivor described visiting a GP as “a lottery as to which kind of help they will get” and said that there is a “lack of diagnosis and failure to understand the significance of the disclosure...many survivors are misdiagnosed with lower level issues such as anxiety and depression.” Survivors feel that the effects of the abuse are not well known in the NHS. Frontline staff are not equipped to deal with disclosures, and they do not have the knowledge to direct survivors to appropriate treatments. It is telling that, although 89% of survivors said that their mental health had been negatively affected by abuse, only 16% said that NHS mental health services had met their needs. Another survivor told our inquiry:

“I’m a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and of the mental health system.”

Recent studies have found that a wide range of social and environmental factors increase the risk of mental ill health, including growing up in poverty, early separation from parents and experiencing sexual abuse as a child. Professor Richard Bentall at the University of Sheffield has argued that the evidence of a link between childhood trauma and a future psychiatric disorder is at least as strong as the evidence of genetic causes. Solid evidence also shows that adverse childhood experiences can affect the brain structure, which then affects a person’s sensitivity
to stressful situations and causes fluctuations in mood throughout adulthood. That has significant ramifications for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse have two cards dealt against them. Because the trauma of the abuse increases their risk of developing psychiatric disorders later in life, their risk of experiencing adverse conditions as an adult also increases. The findings of that research were borne out by our surveys, which demonstrated survivors’ experiences of poor relationships, unemployment and financial hardship.

Survivors need the professionals they interact with, whether they are child protection social workers, jobcentre work coaches, GPs or judges, to be curious about the circumstances that led to their current predicament, rather than just dealing with the presenting symptoms. Survivors told the inquiry they want frontline professionals to ask not, “What’s wrong with you?” but, “What happened to you?” That professional curiosity will allow survivors to build relationships with professionals that are oriented to meeting their needs. It is key to achieving quality support and, ultimately, securing justice. Will the Minister commit to developing guidance and training on trauma-informed practice for frontline professionals, in conjunction with the specialist voluntary sector and his colleagues across Departments?

Survivors told the APPG that the support they found most important to their recovery is specialist voluntary sector counselling and therapy; I will shorten this to “specialist services” for the rest of the debate. Specialist services provide a range of options tailored to meet the needs of the survivor, including counselling, support groups and advocacy. Survivors say they value these services for a wide range of reasons: the services provide them with support regardless of whether they report to police; they are met by knowledgeable staff in a welcoming, non-clinical environment; and the staff recognise that there is nothing intrinsically “wrong” with them and that the issue is the effects of the trauma caused by the abuse.

We need to continue to develop what we know about child sexual abuse, its links to mental illness, and the most effective forms of support and therapies for survivors. The APPG wants the National Institute of Health Research to commission studies into effective therapies for survivors of abuse and I urge the Minister to support us in that aim.

The inquiry heard that specialist services face unprecedented demand without a related increase in their budgets. SurvivorsUK reported a 30% year-on-year increase in people attempting to access its services in each of the last three years. In 2017, the National Association for People Abused in Childhood—NAPAC—answered 8,500 calls and emails on its national support helpline, but that is less than a tenth of the 90,000 inquiries that it received that year.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate her on securing the debate. She has mentioned one issue that we Rotherham MPs are all too aware of—without the proper services to support these people, justice will not be brought through the courts. If we look at the number of people who the Jay report says were abused, we can see that the number of people who come forward is far, far fewer than that, and without these types of services we will not get these people the justice that they deserve, and they all deserve justice.

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I congratulate him, because as a Rotherham MP he has been an absolutely tireless campaigner, both to get justice for the survivors in Rotherham and to get the support services, which we are still waiting for.

The APPG’s inquiry into adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse found that the average male survivor waited for 26 years before disclosing abuse. Therefore, it cannot be right that, at the moment survivors are ready to speak about their abuse, they are forced to join the back of a queue, with waiting lists a year long, and sometimes waiting lists are closed, due to demand and the lack of funding to meet it. Across the country, the reality for survivors is a lengthy wait for support, or limits on the number of sessions available.

Although it was welcome that the Ministry of Justice increased by 10% the rape support fund, which provides grants to specialist sexual violence support services, specialist services are seeing demand increase far in excess of 10%.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and I am really pleased to have this opportunity to intervene on behalf of survivors in Nottingham. She is doing a fantastic job. Does she agree that there needs to be a specific pathway, so that people can get referred to robust trauma therapy without having to tell their story again and again, and wait for months? Actually, there is a model for such a pathway, because one has been established for veterans. Should not the same level of care and support be given to these people who—to be honest—have already been failed by the system once? Providing such a pathway would go some way towards recognising that we have failed them by allowing them to be victims of child sex abuse in the first place.

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and it should go on the record that she has been such a fighter for the survivors in Nottinghamshire, which is hugely appreciated. Yes, she is right that victims should not have to battle and beg to get support services to enable them to live their life. They are a victim of crime; access to such support should be an automatic right. But victims having to tell their story time and again is something that we keep hearing about. The thing that I am most fearful of is that some of the people going through that fight will just step away from it, and who can blame them for that? However, as a society and as a Government, we need to address that situation and we need to do it now.

To that end, would the Minister consider developing a mechanism for pegging the funds to uplifts in demand, so that specialist services and survivors are not forced to bear the effect of any funding shortfall? Instead, the Government would pre-empt that need and fund it so that specialist services and survivors are not forced to bear the effect of any funding shortfall? Instead, the Government would pre-empt that need and fund it accordingly. We all have to admit that for too long the Government have been behind the curve on this issue.

If we acknowledge the prevalence of abuse and its devastating costs to the individual and society, the logical policy to adopt is a transformational funding
package that funds services that redress the trauma of abuse and help survivors to recover. Minister, that requires more than an occasional 10% uplift.

Will the Minister commit to asking the Chancellor for a cross-Government strategic fund, which meets the core funding needs of specialist services, to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse? He may find that he is pushing against an open door, because in March and again in the main Chamber yesterday the Chief Secretary to the Treasury spoke about survivors, saying in March that “because they have been traumatised and left in despair after suffering the consequences of crime… it should be government’s responsibility to prioritise support for these people”.

Both the NHS and the specialist voluntary sector have a vital role to play in supporting the recovery of survivors. On average, 17% of the budgets for specialist sexual violence and support services comes from the rape support fund, and 14.5% comes from NHS England and clinical commissioning groups, or CCGs. The APPG’s inquiry heard that CCGs have a responsibility for commissioning long-term therapeutic support for survivors. However, when I asked Ministers for an assessment of the effectiveness of CCGs in this regard, they told me that they do not even collect the data on it.

When survivors tell us that the support they need is not there, and specialist support agencies find many CCGs challenging to work with, I must say that this lack of data is extremely concerning. I therefore also ask the Minister to make representations to his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to collect this data centrally, so that proper analysis of it can be made. If it is discovered that CCGs are failing in their duty to commission such support, will he consider ring-fencing funding for the long-term therapeutic support that survivors need?

There also needs to be research into the availability of appropriate services for black, Asian and minority ethnic survivors; for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors; and for disabled survivors. During the APPG’s six-month inquiry, we found virtually no evidence, or indeed recognition, of those survivors’ specific needs, nor a desire to commission the services that they need, which is of considerable concern.

Minister, a nationwide public health campaign about child sexual abuse is required. It would raise awareness and—importantly—reduce stigma. It should also aim to direct both survivors and professionals to sources of information and support. In the absence of professional expertise, survivors said that they need quality information about the impact of abuse and about where they can access support. To date, professionals are described as being “caught out” by disclosures, and therefore as being unable to provide up-to-date, relevant and accurate information. In such a situation, survivors usually take it upon themselves to find information and services on the internet, which has mixed results.

In parallel with a public health campaign, the Government need to address the fact that existing sources of information and support are patchy and disparate. The Government could do more, in co-operation with the specialist voluntary sector, to provide online resources about the impact of abuse, and information about the support services that are available, both locally and nationally. This will necessitate cross-Government working and marshalling existing online information from police and crime commissioners, specialist service umbrella agencies, and the Ministry of Justice’s own Victim and Witness Information website. Survivors and professionals need to know where they can source information and support; currently, there is just no clear answer for them.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): If the hon. Lady will forgive me for saying so, I just cannot congratulate her enough, both on securing this debate today and on her work with the APPG, which I am proud to be a member of.

As Members of Parliament, we come to this place to speak for others, but I am sitting here and the hon. Lady is speaking for me, as a survivor of child sexual abuse myself, through the things that she is saying and the way that she is articulating the difficulties in coming forward—in admitting it even to yourself; admitting it to others is even more difficult. She talked about people taking an average of 26 years to talk about their abuse as a child. For me, it took 40 years, and here I am—an articulate, sensible, educated man.

I urge the hon. Lady to continue this campaign for greater awareness. We all understand that the more we talk about this issue, and the more we break down the stigma, the more that people will come forward. Since I spoke about my own individual case, I have been inundated by people in the same situation contacting me to say, “Me too. We went through that.” I have even had people who work in this place come up to me and say, “You are speaking for us.” I congratulate the hon. Lady, but will she continue to fight for that awareness campaign?

Sarah Champion: First, I promise that I will continue fighting for that awareness campaign, as the Minister knows. Secondly, I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so outspoken on this issue and using his own, personal testimony, because that is what resonates. The reason we set up the APPG was that a staff member in Parliament came to me and shared his experience. Looking around this room, and holding the statistic that 7% of adults in the UK are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the hon. Gentleman will not be the only one present. I admire him, and thank him for sharing his story to help other people. I turn to the Minister after such a testimony and ask him to please address this worrying shortfall, and commit to developing a public health campaign, with the associated website and the information we need alongside it.

I thank all MPs present and the Minister, who I know cares deeply about finding solutions to these issues and has done so much so far. I thank all the professionals and specialists in the voluntary sector and across the board who have contributed to the APPG’s report. Most of all, I thank the 400 survivors of childhood sexual abuse—some of whom are in the room, and many of whom are watching on telly—who have generously given their time and experience to try to make positive change for all victims and survivors in future.

I have illustrated today that child sexual abuse is a public health crisis. The number of affected adults is in the millions, scattered across the four nations of the United Kingdom. The trauma of abuse has severe implications for a survivor’s mental wellbeing, which in turn negatively impacts their relationships, work and financial security. Fortunately, the solution lies before
[Sarah Champion]

us: the Government can ensure that frontline professionals are curious about a person’s trauma, and are able to recognise how that trauma may impact behaviour and wellbeing. They can fund specialist voluntary sector services to meet demand while continuing to improve NHS pathways. They can take responsibility for the information available to survivors, harness new technologies, encourage better collaboration, and prioritise child sexual abuse as a public health issue.

I will leave Members with the words of a survivor from my constituency of Rotherham:

“We need counselling and we need therapy. We need the little things. There’s nothing there. Just a chance to rebuild our lives. It’s Not. Our. Fault.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30.

4.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, as I do so frequently these days. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing a debate on such an important subject, and I will start by briefly acknowledging her work and dedication to the cause of improving support for those who fall victim to the horrendous crimes of sexual violence and child sexual abuse. One of the very real pleasures of doing the job of victims’ Minister is that I have been able to work closely with the hon. Lady, with all the knowledge, passion and determination to improve things that she brings to all she does in this House.

As the hon. Lady highlighted, she has chaired two all-party parliamentary groups on these topics, producing two extremely useful reports with recommendations. I hope that at some point soon, with her permission, I might be able to meet the all-party parliamentary group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I welcome both reports, and commit to giving their recommendations the full and proper consideration they deserve and that the hon. Lady would expect. I will respond to her in due course about the detail of those reports.

I also thank all survivors who took the time to share their experiences to inform the report. I know it takes great courage to speak out about such difficult issues, and I commend them for coming forward for the benefit of other victims and survivors. In that context, I particularly recognise the bravery of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) in speaking up very movingly in this House on a number of occasions about his own experiences, and his commitment to doing everything he can to ensure no one else has to suffer in that way. I want to ensure that we do not lose momentum in this space, and that we build on recent achievements such as the victims’ strategy.

Andrew Griffiths: While the Minister is being nice to me, let me just draw out one point in relation to compensation. I know that we are due to meet—I had to reschedule our meeting—but compensation for victims for child sexual abuse is simply not good enough. Of the 6,861 convictions for child sexual abuse in 2017, compensation orders were issued in only 26 cases. Will the Minister keep that at the forefront of his mind, and make sure that victims of child sexual abuse get the compensation they deserve?

Edward Argar: I know that my hon. Friend has recently made this issue the subject of a ten-minute rule Bill. Although the imposition of those orders is a matter for the judiciary, he is quite right that I am due to meet him shortly, when we can discuss what more can be done to raise awareness of the ability to use them.

We know that these crimes can have lifelong, life-changing impacts on victims, as the hon. Lady has set out. It is therefore essential that high-quality support and information is available to those who need it, when they need it, to do what is possible after such a horrendous crime to help individuals rebuild their lives and come to terms with the trauma.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of information, the Minister may be aware of the Beecholme children’s home scandal of the 1960s. Victims of that scandal have told me that they have had difficulty with the co-operation of, and getting access to information from, local authorities. Does he believe that local authorities should have a responsibility to be as fulfilling and forward with information as possible?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes his point well and powerfully. I hope he will forgive me for not commenting on the detail, as it is still subject to a live investigation, but he has placed on the record his views on that important subject.

I believe we are making good progress, but there is much more to do. Since becoming the victims’ Minister, as the hon. Member for Rotherham alluded to, I have made it my priority to provide more funding to rape and sexual abuse support services. I wished to do three things: the first was to increase the amount of funding available, which we did by 10%. The second was to address the sector’s calls for a multi-year funding settlement, moving from one year to three years. The third, which we continue to work on, was to simplify the process for those organisations applying. The APPG’s report quite rightly highlights the need to pay for counselling as a barrier to accessing support, and I am happy to say that this funding ensures that victims of rape and sexual abuse can access any of the centrally funded support services free of charge in any of the country’s 42 police and crime commissioner areas, regardless of whether they report the crime. That is, of course, on top of £68 million of funding to police and crime commissioners to support victims of crime.

However, the hon. Lady has rightly highlighted a bigger picture. We must seek to replicate what we have achieved in that area more broadly across the funding space, with multi-year settlements, sustainable and appropriate funding levels, and simplification. When she talked about pegging funding to demand and cross-Government work, she highlighted that the most effective vehicle for that will, I suggest, be active engagement with the forthcoming spending review and with the Treasury. I will not pre-judge that spending review or the hon. Lady’s conversations with the Chief Secretary, but I know it is something that the Treasury are very much alive to, and rightly so—in large part because of her work in this area.
The hon. Lady also highlighted the importance of cross-Government working. Departments have joined together across Government to offer additional funding to support victims identified as part of Operation Stovewood in her constituency. We are also working to update and improve the information for victims on gov.uk.

I am conscious of the clock ticking, but I will conclude with a number of points. The first is that, of course, I am always happy to meet the hon. Lady if she wishes to pick this issue up separately. I will also commit to raising the specific issues that she has touched on about the NHS, CCGs, and training and standards in my regular meetings with my opposite number at the Department of Health and Social Care. Once again, I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and look forward to working with her, all hon. Members, Ministers across Government, the sector, and survivors themselves to ensure that victims receive the best care and support we can offer.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. International students can act as ambassadors for us in a funny sort of way, because they understand the culture of the country. More importantly, the two universities in my constituency, the University of Warwick and the University of Coventry, are involved in research and development in the motor car trade, medical facilities or medicines and other such things. Does my hon. Friend agree that when students go back to their own countries, their knowledge of what we can do and can produce may, in a roundabout way, help our trading relationship with those countries?

Mr Bailey: As a fellow west midlands MP, my hon. Friend will have shared the experience of the enormous investment that is coming to the region from Indian entrepreneurs who were educated in this country. That is a hard economic benefit that has accrued.

To get back to the point I was making, we have only achieved £23 billion of the benefit that was targeted way back in 2013.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important case. Has he seen the figures I have seen, which suggest that the number of students coming from India in the last year for which there is data—2017-18—is about half what it was in 2010-11?

Mr Bailey: I will touch on that when I talk about the impact the visa regime has had.

The revised target in the strategy is to have 600,000 students contributing a net £35 billion to the economy by 2030. That would require a growth rate of something like 4% per annum. Whatever the headline figures, that seems an unambitious target. It is lower than we achieved between 2013 and 2018, which in itself was a long way behind our major competitors. The target would perpetuate a system where we are lagging behind in building market share in the very important world market in education.

There is constant repetition within the strategy about the opportunities that we will have once we have left the EU. In all my dealings on this issue, I have never heard anyone say that we are losing our market share because of the EU. I have heard plenty of other explanations, but I do not want our discussion to become hostage to a more partisan debate on our membership of the EU. Whether we are in or out, it is vital that we take the right steps now to maximise the contribution of international students to our economy.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the flagship programmes for our student exchange is the Erasmus programme. Non-EU countries can take part in that, but they must accept freedom of movement. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be hugely detrimental for the UK to leave the Erasmus programme and that the Government must do everything they can to ensure we remain within it?

Mr Bailey: Absolutely. I do not intend to go into the detail of the issues with the EU and students, but obviously the Erasmus programme is enormously attractive. Notwithstanding the Government’s good intentions to perpetuate it, there is still a huge degree of uncertainty. Any future strategy must involve perpetuating that programme.

In 2013, the tier 1 post-study work visa was abolished and stringent requirements were placed on international graduates who wanted to work in the UK following their studies. As a result, the number of students remaining to work following their studies fell by 87% between 2011 and 2016, from nearly 47,000 to just over 6,000. When the BIS Committee visited China in 2012, that was a big issue raised by our Chinese hosts. Similarly, in India it is a highly contentious issue, which I know has been raised by the host Government with our Government and business deputations ever since. The perception is that Britain no longer welcomes foreign students. However often the Government repeat the mantra that we are open for business, while we have a restrictive visa regime, and reported difficulties in obtaining visas, potential applicants will be deterred and our ability to compete with rival countries will be inhibited.

It is understandable that the brightest and best from other countries will want to come here not only for their education, but to use and contribute to our top class research, either in the private sector or the field of academia. From the UK’s perspective, it is ridiculous to invest money in developing talent only to then export it to other countries to use in their private sectors, sometimes in competition with companies in this country.

The fact is that far more generous post-study work offers are available in our competitor countries. That is why we are lagging. My disappointment with the strategy is that it does not identify the core problem, which explains what I consider to be our second rate performance, or provide evidence that the Home Office is willing to change it. The best the strategy offers are the so-called actions 3 and 4. Action 3 is:

“Government will strengthen the UK’s visa offer for international higher education students”.

Action 4 is:

“The UK Government will keep the visa application process for international students under review”.

Those are warm words, but they are not strong or specific enough to motivate the brightest and best foreign students to choose the UK as opposed to other countries with a more generous and specific offer.

Why has this come about? The reason is the Government’s flawed and failed target to reduce net migration to below 100,000. The compilation of statistics of student movements within the net migration figures is worthy of a debate in itself. I do not have time to go into it in depth, but I will make two observations. First, there is considerable polling evidence that the public are far more supportive of the right of students to study and to work for at least two years thereafter than they are tolerant of other forms of immigration. About 75% of people support that approach.

Secondly, the statistical basis of compiling student immigration statistics using the international passenger survey, which was the basis used to introduce the visa policy, was seriously flawed. It overstated the number of students overstaying—the proportion is now considered to be less than 3%. In short, we have a student visa regime that is based on flawed statistics, that runs contrary to public opinion, and that undermines both our ability to recruit the maximum number of students...
and the economic benefits of our amazing institutions. That is one reason I will support the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who I am glad is present, to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

In chapter 1.7 of the strategy, titled “A whole-of-government approach”, different Departments are listed as supporting the strategy, including the Foreign Office, the Department for Education, the Department for International Trade, the Department for International Development, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The conspicuous absentee is the Home Office. Perhaps the Minister can explain why the Home Office is missing from the whole-of-Government approach, when its particular responsibilities are central to the policy’s success.

It is vital that the Home Office is signed up to both the policy and the processes if we are to meet, and hopefully exceed, our targets. The policy will be successful only if we have a visa regime that is competitive with rival providers. I ask the Minister what work the Department is doing with the Home Office to ensure that the visa offer, and the associated costs and processes, are at least as attractive—preferably more attractive—than other national providers?

I would like to discuss many other issues, but I will leave time for other Members to contribute. Unless the Minister can provide an adequate answer on the core issue, I suspect that in five years’ time our successors will debate it again, and we will be further behind in the vital race to secure the potential economic benefits from this market.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at no later than 5.07 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister leaves two minutes at the end for Mr Bailey to wind up, that will be appreciated. Until 5.07 pm, a small but select number of Members, with considerable experience, seek to contribute. To ensure that everyone gets a say there will be a five-minute limit. I call John Howell.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to follow the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). I agree with his description of what we have to offer. The UK has a lot to offer in this area.

As the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria—I will concentrate on Nigeria in my remarks—I am committed to raising education standards around the world. That is important to strengthen our soft power regime globally, and to strengthen the international partnerships on which many things are based, including international business and everyday relationships.

I am pleased that we are looking at the value of our education exports, and that DFID is helping to promote them. In Nigeria, for example, DFID has been doing brilliant work in key areas, such as helping headteachers to develop their skills and to become much more effective.

It has also helped to increase the competence of teachers within that country. Many schools are participating, and the number of those that want to do so has shot up enormously.

I gently take issue with the hon. Gentleman on market share, which I think should be seen not only in terms of bringing people to the UK, but in terms of what we can bring to the countries to which we are trying to export our education. I have been trying to encourage the sort of joint ventures with which I am familiar in the business world between educational establishments in the UK and in Nigeria. I will come to why I am doing that in a second, because I think it will be music to his ears. This debate is not just about straightforward education; it is also about skills, which is important to bear in mind.

In fact, there is a member of the Government who comes from Nigeria but was educated here, at Eton. That is to be applauded, but it is not the end of the story. We have the second largest diaspora in the world here, and we need to encourage them to participate in creating educational links. That is absolutely essential somewhere like Nigeria, because in parts of the country there is enormous resentment of foreign activity—particularly in the north-east, where Boko Haram will not accept British educational expertise for the sole reason that it is foreign. We are developing a two-tier system where the rich can come to the UK, but those who are not so rich have to stay in their home country. I am trying to establish these joint ventures because it is essential that we do something to help to break down that two-tier system and spread as much prosperity as possible in other countries—not just to provide people with a better education, although that is important, but because it is the only way to stop the terrorists in the north-east of Nigeria and elsewhere.

I am looking for British schools to go to Nigeria and set up in partnership with local schools. I hope that they will be able to deliver the prosperity on which we and so many Nigerians depend; I am quite encouraged by what I have seen so far. That ought to be taken into account in developing the market share idea, because it is an important part of developing their overseas strategy as well as ours.

4.51 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I very much support the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) made. I share his worry about our falling market share with respect to the overseas students we support in the UK. I want to speak about one problem that has particularly hit our performance.

In 2011, the Home Office gave a licence to the American firm ETS to deliver the TOEIC—test of English for international communication—in the UK. Over the following three years, more than 58,000 overseas students took that test to demonstrate that they spoke good enough English to study here. In February 2014, “Panorama” exposed the significant scale of cheating at TOEIC centres that took place with the connivance of ETS.

ETS responded by undertaking an analysis of its recordings of all 58,000 tests over the three years. It concluded that 33,725 candidates had definitely cheated.
and 22,694 had probably cheated, which adds up to virtually all of them. As a result of the allegations, more than 35,000 of the students lost their visas and many were thrown off their courses midway through. Appeals were not permitted in the UK, and the students involved lost all the fees that they had paid.

Five years later, the plight of many is dire. Last night in the Attlee Suite, the film-maker Tim Langford premiered “Inquisition”, a deeply disturbing and compelling short film about the plight of five students who are still in the UK. There is a moving article in The Guardian today about the plight of three students who gave up and left the UK and who are now in a terrible situation in their home countries. Those who are still here are not allowed to study or work. Many of them depend on support from friends. Some had invested their family’s life savings in obtaining a British degree and are now destitute, have no qualifications, and have apparently been found guilty of cheating by the UK authorities.

It is now becoming clear that many—probably most—of those who lost their visas in that way did not cheat. The National Audit Office has recognised the problem and is due to report on the scandal on Friday. I welcome the Home Secretary’s recent announcement that after the report is published he will make an oral statement in the House about proposals to address what happened. However, although the 58,000 students who sat the test were from a great number of countries around the world, the largest numbers came from the Indian subcontinent: 6,000 from Bangladesh, 8,000 from India, 10,000 from Pakistan, 1,000 from Nepal and 1,000 from Sri Lanka. Unsurprisingly, in the light of how we have treated those students, there has been a very big fall in the number of people who have come from those countries since the TOEIC scandal: 48.5% fewer started their first year of tertiary education here in 2017-18 than in 2010-11.

One very disappointing aspect of what happened is that students who were thrown off their courses and plunged into crisis received very little support from their universities. At the film première last night, a UK university immigration adviser said that the university that he worked for at the time had forbidden him to assist the students affected. It will take a lot of work to repair the damage that the scandal has caused to the reputation of UK higher education.

Where students are able to regain their visas, perhaps following a statement from the Home Secretary in the next couple of weeks, does the Minister agree that their former universities need to help them? In particular, does he agree that it would be wholly unacceptable for the universities to require those students to start their courses and pay their fees all over again?

4.56 pm

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), the former Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills, on giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue.

As hon. Members have said, our world-class universities have been a great asset for our country for generations. They have attracted young, bright people from all over the world, giving them an opportunity to receive a first-class higher education and giving us an opportunity to inculcate an understanding of our culture and worldview. That has ensured that we do not recede as a cultural reference point, which is more important than ever now that we are doing Brexit.

It is a huge asset for us that more world leaders have been educated in the UK than in any other country but the US. Frankly, I am concerned that the next generation of world leaders—the next Bill Clintons, the next Benazir Bhuttos—may not choose to study in the UK. All of us in Parliament have a duty to ensure that they put the UK at the very top of the list of countries around the world where they want to study.

Frankly, one would think that a Government committed to global Britain and to extolling the projection of our values around the world would do more to cultivate the important opportunity that international students offer us. As hon. Members have made clear, however, part of the problem is that since 2010 we have included students in our net migration target, so we are doing precisely the opposite: through a welter of restrictive Home Office policies, we are detering people from choosing the UK over other countries. That explains our substantial underperformance in comparison with core competitors around the world.

Of course market share is not the be-all and end-all of any activity, but it is an important indicator of competitiveness and we are losing it very rapidly: our market share has fallen from approximately 12% in 2010 to just 8% in 2016. We must look seriously at why that significant rate of decline is happening. As hon. Members have said, we are seeing some growth in absolute terms, but there has been a dramatic fall in the proportion of students from some of the most important countries in the market for international higher education, including India, which the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) rightly mentioned.

Like other hon. Members, I welcome the publication of the international education strategy: it is good that we have an ambitious goal for higher education and other education exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) was right to say that exports can come in many forms—not just students coming here, but transnational education, for example.

We should not be phobic about international students coming to study in this country, but I am afraid that is the impression that we have all too often given because of the Home Office’s restrictive approach. That is why I and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) have tabled a new clause to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill that would acknowledge the important contribution of international students in two key ways. First, it would insure universities against the risk that a Government will decide to reduce net migration swiftly by slashing international student numbers. Any future Government who intend to cap numbers will first have to secure parliamentary approval.

Secondly, the new clause will ensure that we take a much smarter approach to post-study work. As hon. Members have already said, it has been severely restricted in recent years on the back of shoddy evidence produced by the Home Office back in 2012-13. Students will invest their time, money and human capital elsewhere if a competitive post-study work regime is not available in a particular country. Our core competitors—the US,
Canada and New Zealand—offer international students the chance to work for up to three years after graduation, and Australia offers up to four years. Hacked back to just four months in 2012, our offer is simply not competitive. Although the international education strategy promises to increase that to six months, it is still not enough. Twelve months for some more advanced courses is also not enough.

While we wait for the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill to come back to the House on Report, I urge the Minister to look at the strong support the new clause has from MPs of all parties, and to assure me that the Government will take steps to welcome the clause and implement its recommendations.

5.1 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) for securing this extremely important debate and for his excellent opening speech, which reminded us all of the need to champion and support our higher education sector in the UK.

We know that almost 450,000 non-UK-domiciled students study in UK universities, which contributes about £19 billion to our economy—about £95,000 per student—and supports over 200,000 jobs. It is clearly a sector that we need to support. I welcome the Government’s international education strategy and their ambition to increase education exports to £35 billion and grow the number of international students to 600,000 by 2030. I hope we see in the report a change in the mood music coming from the Government, because we need overseas students to know they will be welcomed and supported in the UK.

I acknowledge the widespread support in the sector for the strategy, but there are a number of questions, too. It would be really good to hear the Minister respond to some of the issues that hon. Members have already emphasised. First, the Government need to do something about the visa system. Students find it too complicated, too bureaucratic and too difficult to access in their own countries. As hon. Members said, there is also a huge issue with post-study work visas and how long they last, compared with what our competitors offer. We know that countries such as Australia, Canada and the US have recently seen high growth in international demand for study, while the total number of international students enrolled in the UK has stayed flat. I would say to the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) that this is a hugely important point and we need to address it.

The chief executive of Universities UK, Alistair Jarvis, said in October 2018: “Despite the quality and popularity of our universities as destination for international students, in recent years we’ve seen a declining market share in relation to competitors.” If the Government are to deliver on their strategy, that clearly needs to stop. We also need to do something to ensure that we have reciprocal arrangements with Europe. The strategy does not say much about European students, and I would like to hear how the Minister intends to ensure that we do not lose students coming from Europe. The reciprocal arrangements are very important, as is identifying new markets.

I was very excited to read the industrial education strategy. There was something on regional priorities and I thought, “Great! The Government are going to look at our regional universities being a priority.” When I read it, I thought, “Oh dear, no.” Our priority is regions of the world. The middle east and Latin America are important for new markets, but we need to protect the markets we have as well as targeting cold spots. We have to recognise the importance of diversity in the sector. Durham University in my constituency brings to the city huge diversity, which would just not be there without it. That is something we need to celebrate and expand.

Hon. Members have talked about the importance of soft power. I have just come back from a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Education Foundation conference. Many leaders across the world were educated in the UK, and we need to ensure that our higher education sector can attract future leaders. We need to do that by recognising the importance of global mobility for our young people as well. We need to support the British Council more effectively and look at how scholars from overseas, including postgraduate students, contribute to our research base and innovation. We need to ensure that we recognise the importance of transnational education.

In my remaining time, I thank the hon. Member for Orpington for tabling his amendment to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. I totally support it and hope it is approved in due course.

5.6 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing this important debate. It has been very interesting to listen to all the speeches. All those who contributed to the debate were very erudite, drawing on their experience, and passionate about the problems that the higher education sector is experiencing across the UK.

I am a member of the Education Committee, which in 2017 published “Exiting the EU: challenges and opportunities for higher education.” Many of the issues that have been raised today were also raised in that report—they were mainly challenges rather than opportunities. Looking down the years, I do not think much has changed in that respect. It saddens me to think that we will not be able to move forward. The report is good and expansive, and it would be wonderful if its recommendations were carried forward.

The biggest issue for Scottish universities is that we have four-year degrees, so three-year visas will just not cut it. The impact on our ability to attract students will be severe. We really need a separate immigration policy for Scotland, and Scottish National party MPs are fighting constantly for that.

The other issue is that the UK Government promised to replace overall EU funding with a shared prosperity fund. Despite repeated promises, there has not yet been any detail on how this will be equitably established and implemented. We have been promised new regulations that will affect the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. This is really important to Scotland, because since 2014 we have succeeded in drawing down £533 million of Horizon 2020 research funding.
We punch above our weight. Scotland has been particularly successful, attracting more than 11% of all funding that has been won competitively by UK organisations. Per head of population, we are outperforming Germany. All this is put at risk by the visa system and the reluctance of EU nations and other prospective students from abroad to come to the UK because of the hostile environment that this Government have brought about through their immigration policies. I, too, welcome what the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) is trying to do.

I am very worried that Scotland will lose out. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) mentioned regions. Now, Scotland is frequently referred to in this place as a region. I do not think it is a region; it is a country. We have differences that must be addressed, because Scottish education does indeed punch above its weight and has had a well-deserved reputation for hundreds of years. Scottish higher education rose out of Scots' outward European vision, going right back to just after the middle ages. Scots went to universities in Europe before there were any in Scotland, and brought back ideas and progress. Universities have been a major force in Scotland for 400 or 500 years. They are suffering because of the Government’s reluctance to do something about visas. That cannot be allowed to continue.

International student numbers have increased year on year, and the Government have been quick to celebrate their success in growing education exports. However, we should note that the Department for Education has acknowledged that accurate data does not exist, so we cannot fully ascertain the export success of the sector. Although the figures may be rising, our performance relative to our peers, including Australia, Canada and the United States, leaves much to be desired. Given the time constraints in this debate, I will get straight to the point that hon. Members have made about international students and visas.

The all-party parliamentary group for international education strategy has acknowledged that accurate data does not exist, so we cannot fully ascertain the export success of the sector. Although the figures may be rising, our performance relative to our peers, including Australia, Canada and the United States, leaves much to be desired. Given the time constraints in this debate, I will get straight to the point that hon. Members have made about international students and visas.

The all-party parliamentary group for international students noted last year that the Government’s hostile environment has resulted in a marked drop in the UK’s attractiveness as an education destination for international students. It notes that between 2012 and 2015, the UK recorded just 0.7% growth in international student numbers, compared with 22.5% in the US, 26.9% in Canada and 18% in Australia. Researchers at University College London found that the UK has already slipped behind Australia and the United States as the biggest destinations for international students, and warned that Canada is poised to overtake it. Universities UK data shows that the number of Indian students coming to the UK has approximately halved in the past five years.

The hostile environment policy vigorously pursued and rigorously applied by the Government has seen thousands of students denied the right to work after graduation. Thousands who were in the UK legally have had their student visas revoked, as the Government unfairly attempted to clamp down on international students. Universities UK also found that 98% of overseas students complied with their visa requirements. What message does that send to prospective students? Many students come to the UK in good faith to undertake a course of study but find themselves the victims of unscrupulous fraudsters. Instead of tackling the fraudsters, the Government have criminalised the students, who now may be seen as criminals.

The recent TOEIC cases, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham raised, highlight just how negligent and damaging the Government’s handling of this matter has been. Some 7,000 students have been found to have had their visas wrongly revoked over accusations of cheating. Students are left in a legal limbo, with their visas revoked through no fault of their own. They are barred from accessing public services and prevented from obtaining work or renting housing. Many find themselves banned from entering the United Kingdom for 10 years. The damage that that has done to our international reputation as a preferred destination for international students is clearly substantial.

The Government’s clumsy handling of trade talks with India will have done nothing to reverse that trend. The message is, “We want your business, but we don’t want your people.” The Government’s obsession with arbitrary immigration targets has slowed progress in talks about visa arrangements for students and workers. That is hurting our capacity to market UK education as an overseas export and sell Britain as a destination for foreign direct investment. It is likely to be a recurring issue in trade talks with other nations, given that the relaxing of mobility and visa arrangements is a key feature of modern trade agreements. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what the Government’s position on that matter will be, in respect of all the various trade agreements that they have promised, which have largely failed to materialise.

These issues have been compounded by the Government’s handling of Brexit. Since the EU referendum result, universities have reported a fall in the number of EU students—in particular, postgraduates—enrolling in British universities. EU students are reported to contribute up to £2.75 billion per year to the British economy through tuition fees and related costs. Additionally, approximately £1 billion in research funding to British universities is provided through the European Union.

It is now understood that the Government intend to withdraw home fee status from EU nationals from 2020 onwards, which is likely further to drive the decline in the number of international students. That is already squeezing the finances of many of our universities and stiffering their capacity to plan for the future. Will the Minister set out precisely what the Government’s policy is in that respect? What impact will the proposed changes have on our education sector? That is in addition to the uncertainty about the future of Erasmus and Horizon 2020. How does the Minister intend to achieve the targets set out in the international educational strategy of boosting education exports to £35 billion a year and growing international student numbers by 600,000 by 2030?
5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. We have had well-informed contributions from across the House. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) for raising this important topic. When he chaired the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and dealt with higher education, I chaired the Education Committee, and we worked in tandem.

As everyone has said, the UK has a wonderful education system. Despite its size, four of the world’s top 10 universities, and 18 out of the top 100, are here. We lead Europe in having the most highly rated universities. With early years, further education, our independent education, I chaired the Education Committee, and we worked in tandem.

Perhaps because of my background, I find that education is one of the most interesting sectors that I deal with as a trade Minister. Education gives almost no negatives. It brings real money and builds a think tank and people who come here to study then form part of teams or found companies and innovate, when they might not otherwise have done so. We must be restless, forward looking and ambitious—as everyone in this Chamber has been—to ensure that the potential of emerging opportunities in the global economy are used to their fullest.

The rapid shifts in economic and demographic power across the global economy are creating opportunities in precisely the areas where the UK enjoys a competitive advantage. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) knows well, last year the Prime Minister set out an ambition that we should seek to become the largest G7 investor in Africa. We need to work with countries, such as Nigeria, across Africa—I just met an economic Minister from Tunisia—to bring companies of all sorts into Africa, and what better than companies that work in education?

We look to deliver through the strategy in several ways. The strategy recognises that it is not Government who export, but our educational providers and institutions. That is why it is a sector-led strategy. I am grateful to all colleagues across the House, whatever their criticisms of elements of Government strategy, for supporting this strategy, which has been well supported and much crafted by the sector. The sector-led strategy was developed in co-operation with educators and looks to address the practical barriers that they face to exporting, and to find the right tools to overcome them.

Yesterday, I met Destination for Education, which is a coalition of pathway providers—people who help others come into our system—including INTO, Kaplan and Study Group. We discussed their future engagement with Government and, in particular, how we can co-operate on changes to the student visa process and respond effectively to competition from rival markets, which so many hon. Members have mentioned. That is about Government listening to the needs of providers and adapting our approach as we go. Several key organisations and individuals have been involved in achieving that level of engagement and dialogue.

If I may—without being invidious to some—I highlight the work of Universities UK International, the UK skills partnership, English UK and, in particular, the British Council and its chief executive Sir Claran Devane, for their invaluable help in setting up engagement sessions to allow us to take on board the views of a broad range of education providers. Those providers have a wide range of skills and experience when it comes to exporting, and the strategy is about catering to these diverse needs.

Stephen Timms: Since the Minister has mentioned Universities UK, does he agree with my point that students who get their visas back after losing them because of a TOEIC cheating allegation should be helped by the universities to which they return, so they do not have to go back to square one and pay their fees all over again?

Graham Stuart: If a student finds themselves in that position, I hope and expect that the university would be supportive of their students. One of the strategy’s central aims is to ensure that we have a more welcoming offer.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): We have heard about the benefits that international students bring to the UK, and about the reputational risk of malign visa arrangements, but it is important to reflect, as the Minister just mentioned, on the fact that the economic impact of international students ripples out far beyond the locations of the particular universities. We know about the effect of universities such as Aberystwyth in my constituency, but a 2017 report showed that, in Wales, the impact of international students alone sustained more than 1,600 jobs in regions where there is not a university. That is an important point to bear in mind when we look at immigration policy.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful for that contribution.

Most countries on Earth—some 160—use UK international qualifications in their national secondary exams. Thousands of international schools use the UK’s K12 curriculum, and almost 25,000 students attend more than 40 overseas UK schools. As I have said, the latest figures show that our exports are worth almost £20 billion. That includes transnational education, which has experienced the most meteoric rise in value, albeit £20 billion.

Stephen Timms: Since the Minister has mentioned Universities UK, does he agree with my point that students who get their visas back after losing them because of a TOEIC cheating allegation should be helped by the universities to which they return, so they do not have to go back to square one and pay their fees all over again?

Graham Stuart: If a student finds themselves in that position, I hope and expect that the university would be supportive of their students. One of the strategy’s central aims is to ensure that we have a more welcoming offer.
Sometimes there can be misconceptions and myths, but we need to recognise where we need to improve what we do, how we do it and the way that it is communicated. We recognise the need to do that in various markets if we are to meet the targets that we have set.

The strategy sets out to look at export data that we hold for education so that we have a more accurate basis on which to judge our success. At the strategy’s heart is an ambitious goal of achieving an increase in the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to increase the number of international higher education students to 600,000 per year.

A lot of the focus of the debate has been on the visa issue. Although that is a Home Office issue rather than a trade Minister’s day job, at the heart of the strategy is a whole-of-Government approach, to put in place the practical, advisory and promotional support to strengthen the UK’s position at the forefront of global education, connect international partners, open markets and unlock new opportunities in rapidly growing areas such as education technology.

When I found that we had an education strategy that dated back to 2013 and was not on target, one of the first things I did was go and see the Secretary of State for Education. He came absolutely on board and was super supportive. I also reached out to Home Office colleagues; I do not know where the misunderstanding about the Home Office involvement in this strategy has come from, but it has really come forward and is an important part of the team. We are working together.

Colleagues will be aware that the Migration Advisory Committee made its recommendations, and the Government chose to go further than what MAC had suggested in terms of post-study provision. That is an indication of the Government’s commitment to getting that right. Matters are being kept under review, and if I were in Opposition, I might call that warm words, but it is much better than their not being under review.

We have our educational strategy; we are working as a team across Government; and we are committed to making sure that we get the whole package right so that we are as welcoming and competitive as we can be. The Home Office is fundamentally part of that, and is committed to keeping the immigration aspects of that package under review, in order to deliver in the appropriate way.

I probably have very little time left.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): A minute and a half.

Graham Stuart: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. Just to nail the Home Office point, action 6 sets out clearly that the UK Government will enhance the education sector advisory group, and that it will be supported with a representative from the Home Office. I hope it is embedded in there pretty clearly.

On the Indian visa front, during the year ending 18 December 2018, study-related visas issued to Indian students increased by 35%. Although colleagues were right to highlight the drop, there is a significant increase, and we are working hard to get that message out. Ninety-six per cent. of Indian students who apply for a visa get one. I appeal to everyone to challenge what is not right, but not to overemphasise the negative in a way that leads people to think that we are not open when we are.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), speaking for the Scottish National party, mentioned four-year courses at Scottish universities being matched with inappropriate three-year visas. That situation is only in the event of no deal. As with so many of the points made by colleagues across the Chamber today, the obvious way to avoid the downsides that they have highlighted is to support the deal. The failure to support the deal, after standing on manifestos in most cases promised to get us out of Europe, has contributed, so there is no point in shedding crocodile tears over a result driven by Members’ own voting decisions.

On ETS, there was clearly significant fraud. Twenty-five people involved in organising and facilitating language-test fraud have received criminal convictions, so there was a real issue.

5.28 pm

Mr Bailey: This debate merits a much longer time being spent on it, given the quality and expertise shown in the contributions. A whole range of issues was raised.

I accept what the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said about the importance of transnational education, but I do not think this is either/or. A better visa offer, generating more foreign students coming to this country, would of itself mean more capital and more experience for those higher education or other institutions to carry out work in other countries as well. Ultimately, there would be a more all-embracing educational offer from this country.

I accept that the Minister and his team are fully signed up to this particular approach. I welcome his comments about Home Office involvement, but the fact remains that in the actual strategy, under the whole-of-Government approach among the Departments listed, the Home Office is a significant absentee. However, we will judge the strategy by what comes out of it. I very much hope that subsequent involvement of the Home Office, the Minister’s Department and other relevant Departments will demonstrate that they are addressing the issues raised today, as I am sure he will raise those issues with them.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 May 2019

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

[DAVID HANSON in the Chair]

Clinical Trials and Clinical Research Capability

1.30 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting clinical trials and the UK’s future clinical research capability.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate on supporting clinical trials and the UK’s future clinical research capability.

This is an immensely important sector. Any generation wants its successor generation to be healthier and have a better standard of living, whether the treatments that are produced are life-enhancing ones or life-saving and life-protecting ones. That is increasingly important: there is an ageing population, not just in the UK but globally, so there is an increasing need for a variety of new treatments coming through the life sciences sector. Clinical trials play such a large part in that.

Monday was international Clinical Trials Day, marking the anniversary of the first clinical trial, conducted by surgeon’s mate James Lind on HMS Salisbury in 1747. Scurvy was a huge problem at that time, not just for the Royal Navy but for navies all over the world. Lind set up a clinical trial with 12 sailors who had scurvy, and in groups of two he administered cider, sulphuric acid, vinegar, seawater, oranges and lemons, and a spice paste washed down with barley water. The sailors who took citrus fruits made good progress, but the other participants did not make any progress, so Lind had evidence that citrus fruits worked to help those sailors recover from scurvy. Notably, there was a small, incremental improvement in the health of those sailors who drank cider; no doubt there are other, wider health benefits that come from cider, but it was a reasonably clear trial. Although it took many years, the Royal Navy later adopted the approach of compelling sailors to take lemon juice initially, and lime juice later on, to protect against scurvy. That is why American sailors became “limeys”.

Clinical trials have evolved substantially since that time. In 2017-18, there was a record number of participants and trials in the UK. It is so important, not just for people’s healthcare but for the life sciences sector of which clinical trials are such an important part, that Britain wants to maintain that position. People find fascinating, incredibly rewarding jobs in that sector.

As in all things, all sectors and all times, funding is of immense importance, and we have to ensure that our clinical research environment is properly funded in a number of different ways. My favourite part of the 2017 Conservative manifesto was the commitment to increase research and development spend in the UK from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. That is an important target, taking us up to the top quartile of OECD countries. The scientific community more broadly would like to see that increase as a stepping stone to a target of spending 3% of UK GDP on R&D. That would really enhance our position, which is world-leading at the moment; however, in an increasingly competitive world, we need to focus and enhance that contribution.

In the previous Parliament, I was a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, which was a very positive Committee. There was a huge amount of consensus across the party divide about the agenda that we wanted to set and pursue, and an important agenda to increase our R&D spend came out of that Committee. It was very positive to see that commitment in the 2017 Conservative manifesto; however, we have to deliver on it. At a time of funding challenges across all Departments and all areas, we have to maintain that level of investment.

It is important to recognise the Government’s commitment, outlined in the life sciences sector deal 2, with the Government working in conjunction with industry to strengthen further the environment for clinical research in the UK, and the infrastructure for the safe and responsible use of patient data through the digital innovation hub programme. We should also recognise the contribution that can be made to the continued development of the National Institute for Health Research, which should receive an uplift in line with the increases to funding through UK Research and Innovation, as recommended in the life sciences industrial strategy.

There are also further considerations when it comes to funding, such as whether the UK will fully participate in the EU's flagship framework programme 9. At the moment, we participate fully in Horizon 2020; we are committed until the end of that project, and to any ongoing research projects beyond the end of that programme. However, we do not yet know whether the United Kingdom will participate in Horizon Europe, either fully or partly, post Brexit. That is a huge concern to so many people from the scientific community, as it is for many sectors and industries, not only because we want investment in buildings and laboratories and the development of skills and talents in the UK, but because we want to bring in people from abroad. People need that confidence. This is not just about funding, which is immensely important, but about the networks, the communications and the community that go with participating in that group.

I am certainly sympathetic to the idea that Brexit, no matter how well we deliver it, will be a challenging time for the United Kingdom and for organisations, whether in the charitable sector, business or academia. Delivering a healthy research clinical trials environment post Brexit will pose a challenge, and if we could make a commitment to—or at least express sympathy towards—our participation in Horizon Europe, the scientific community would appreciate being given that kind of confidence.

Funding is of great importance, and that topic may be further developed by other hon. Members present, but regulation is also an enormous priority for the UK. There are also further considerations when it comes to funding, such as whether the UK will fully participate in the EU’s flagship framework programme 9. At the moment, we participate fully in Horizon 2020; we are committed until the end of that project, and to any ongoing research projects beyond the end of that programme. However, we do not yet know whether the United Kingdom will participate in Horizon Europe, either fully or partly, post Brexit. That is a huge concern to so many people from the scientific community, as it is for many sectors and industries, not only because we want investment in buildings and laboratories and the development of skills and talents in the UK, but because we want to bring in people from abroad. People need that confidence. This is not just about funding, which is immensely important, but about the networks, the communications and the community that go with participating in that group.
population within the UK may be too small to deliver an effective trial. Nearly 30% of Cancer Research UK’s clinical trials involve an additional EU member state, showing the importance of international collaboration to that organisation. More widely, 50% of all UK cancer research is international.

The global direction of travel is towards the harmonisation of regulations and standards. The EU-UK relationship is of immense importance; it makes it easier and faster to set up trials, and to deliver on the conclusions of those trials. It would be useful if the Government could highlight what they were doing with regard to the clinical trials regulation, which is superseding the clinical trials directive. There is a concern in this. One concern that I have with the EU is that it can be slow to advance and assess what it has done, where it is and how it needs to move on. The clinical trials directive was first developed in 2001 and implemented in 2004. The decision to change, and that the regulation should supersede the directive, should have been taken in 2016, but there have been delays from that time. There is an ambition to deliver the regulation later this year, but there is concern as to whether that will be achieved. I appreciate that the Government’s position is that they will seek to fully participate in the regulation and adopt it wholly, but that is only part of what needs to be done.

Data from the trials will be collected in a variety of countries. While we may be able to contribute our data, there is no guarantee that we will be able to access that data in that international network post-Brexit. It is immensely important that we have certainty that we can use the portal post-Brexit and access the data to ensure that our scientific community has that information. It is an important part of providing confidence and a strong ongoing position for our research community.

Mobility of people is immensely important. It truly is a global undertaking to have an effective life sciences sector and the clinical trials that go with it. The people who contribute to the sector are very mobile. Our charitable sector is incredibly strong—a sector where we are in many other countries—and is a huge asset. We can go to any charitable organisation, business or university and see a wealth of talent that comes not only from the UK but especially from the EU. We also have people from America, Africa and Asia. We have people from across the world, but our close physical proximity to EU countries lends itself to a large number of people from the EU coming here.

We have to value our relationship with EU nation states. Post-Brexit, we want people to be able to go to EU countries, because people leaving the UK to go to France or Germany may make an immense contribution to those countries. There is huge value in the sharing of ideas. When people perhaps come back later in their careers, they have that wealth of knowledge that they can bring with them, which may be lost if we do not allow and support mobility. There is particular concern over the £30,000 income threshold that people coming to the UK would have to meet. There is ongoing debate about the threshold and whether it will stand and suggestions on how it will be amended. It is worth noting that it is a challenge for post-doctoral researchers and their research technicians, who may not be above that threshold. The threshold is more of a challenge outside London and the south-east, and other parts of the country and other nations within our United Kingdom will see a greater impact. The Government need to consider that.

We need to re-examine the costly and burdensome visa process. In 2008, it was estimated that a five-year visa for a researcher with a partner and three children coming to the UK would cost more than £11,000. The same researcher and family could obtain a four-year French talent passport for a little over £1,000. We do not want the UK to have barriers to people coming here, participating and making an enormous contribution. Immigration is a very sensitive subject for the country as a whole. It is positive that in the two or three years since the referendum vote in 2016, tensions or concerns have come down ever so slightly. There still is significant concern, which is a problem, but when I talk to people and raise the UK’s current approach or possible approach to immigration, they have immense pride in seeing our country as a destination for some of the most talented scientists and technicians from the EU and the wider world. They want to come to the United Kingdom and make an immensely positive contribution. We should be proud about so much in our immigration system and the people who come here. We should make more of how strong the scientific community is in the United Kingdom.

In my closing remarks, I want to highlight and repeat that the United Kingdom has a long and proud history of being a world leader in clinical trials. Not only were we the first nation to conduct one but we should be proud of the wealth of talent involved and the scale of our clinical trials. The Government are doing the right thing and are going in the right direction. We are being immensely ambitious with what we are doing for the future of medical research, but there are obvious challenges in making that a reality. Getting the regulatory framework is important, as is the immigration system. The national health service is immensely important as an organisation, but it is not quite playing up to its strengths and its potential with its data. That data is an incredibly valuable asset that is of increasing value as time goes on, both in how it can be used and how clinical trials can be held. Practitioners can access that data to develop the next generation of drugs to save lives and to enhance our lives.

We are going in the right direction, but more needs to be done. There are concerns about Brexit, but we can deliver a good relationship with the EU and the rest of the world. It can be a positive thing. The Government need to set out a more robust position. Academia and business in the UK want that, and I especially thank the UK’s charitable research sector, which does such an immense amount of good work. I highlight and thank Cancer Research UK, Parkinson’s UK and Breast Cancer Care.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate. We now move seamlessly to the Front-Bench responses.

1.47 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing this important debate. I particularly
enjoyed his opening remarks on scurvy, and I thank him for reminding me about where the term “limies” came from. He is obviously passionate and knowledgeable about this subject. I have quickly skimmed through some of the things he spoke about and, I have to say, I found very little to disagree with in his speech.

The hon. Gentleman said that Brexit will be challenging for many reasons, especially getting clinical trials properly conducted post-Brexit, particularly when, at the moment, no one knows what is happening. He pointed out something that had not crossed my mind: if we do not get those relationships right post-Brexit, the UK is too small a country to conduct positive and technically feasible trials in new and important areas.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of harmonisation across Europe, and about something especially important to Scotland and to my party: the ability of people to move freely. We must take a European and a broader, transnational view at how much people working in the sector can bring to this country, and what UK nationals can bring back when they return from working abroad.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned visa costs, another highly important issue for Scotland and the Scottish Government. Astonishingly, a visa for a researcher and their family can cost 11 times as much in this country as it would in France. That would be a no-brainer for a clinical researcher looking at where to go to further his or her career.

Clinical trials are essential for bringing new medicines to people. They test whether new treatments are safe and effective, and allow patients to access new medicines earlier. The UK regulatory environment for clinical trials is led by the Health Research Authority and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Wellcome, whose report I will mention later, found that more than 4,800 UK-EU clinical trials took place between 2004 and 2016. Around 40% of the trials currently run in the UK are being run with other member states. Clinical research supported by the National Institute for Health Research clinical research network has generated an estimated £2.4 billion and nearly 40,000 jobs. This is not an insignificant sector.

New legislation—the EU clinical trial regulation—will replace the EU clinical trials directive in 2020. Under the CTR, all trial applications, data and co-ordinated decisions from member states will be communicated through a single portal. Streamlined systems and communications will help to simplify compliance with the CTR, potentially saving researchers in the EU £600 million a year, as well as offering savings of £60 million a year to UK researchers.

Clinical trials are managed nationally in the UK by the MHRA, although some aspects of clinical trials are shared across the EU medicines regulatory network. For example, a clinical trial sponsor or legal representative for clinical trials in the EU should be based in the EU or European economic area. Currently, 40% of UK-based trials also have a site in the EU.

Wellcome’s report “Brexit and Beyond: Clinical trials” stated that the best option for trials is “full UK participation in the EU clinical trials system”. Wellcome found alternative options, but posited that all “involve significant trade-offs that would have an impact on UK-EU clinical trials.” The Scottish National party advocates a second EU vote. However, failing that, and failing full participation, the UK should meet its commitment to put the EU clinical trial regulation into law, and should remain aligned to the EU framework.

The UK Government stipulate that in the case of no deal, the MHRA would take on responsibilities currently undertaken through the EU system. However, Wellcome found that, even if the withdrawal agreement is voted through, which after the last few days seems impossible, “the MHRA would not be able to lead on reviewing applications, a role known as being a ‘reporting Member State’.”

No deal would likely lead to significant uncertainty over the legal arrangements for clinical trials. Brexit is already having a negative effect, with Reuters finding that the “number of new clinical trials started in Britain last year was 25 percent lower than the average for 2009-16”.

It highlights Brexit as the reason for the fall in numbers. A total of 597 trials were initiated in Britain in 2017, against an average of 806 over the previous eight years. The UK Government have committed to exploring the option of full association to research and innovation programmes, but there are no guarantees of success.

Chris Green: As we were discussing before the debate, the United Kingdom is a world leader in research and development and, because of the excellence in the UK, we receive disproportionate funding from the European Union. Does the hon. Lady share my concern, and agree that, post Brexit, the UK Government need to maintain that enhanced level of funding?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree. As we were discussing, Scotland punches above its weight per head of population. From memory, we receive 11% of Erasmus+ funding, which is more than we should. Again, that is because of the excellence of the research in Scottish universities, in conjunction with EU nationals and other universities across Europe.

Where are the UK Government currently in exploring the option of full association to research and innovation programmes with the EU? The Department of Health and Social Care wrote in August 2018: “A scenario in which the UK leaves the EU without agreement (a ‘no deal’ scenario) remains unlikely”.

Again, “facts are chie ts that winna ding”—I will spell that for Hansard later. The ground is moving beneath our feet as we speak, just before the recess. It is vital that we do not leave without a deal, but—although we can all hope—a no deal is becoming more likely. We need to think very carefully. Can the Minister give us any reassurance that there will not be a no-deal Brexit? That is asking a lot, I know, but it has to be asked. The quote that I have been given is: “Negotiations are progressing well and both we and the EU continue to work hard to seek a positive deal.”

Can the Minister provide an update on all negotiations taking place?

The Brexit Health Alliance brings together a range of health professional, patient, and health and care organisations. The highly influential group has called for a deal that delivers the closest possible alignment and regulatory co-operation between the UK and the
EU with respect to medicines and medical devices, to guarantee patient safety and public health. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree with that. We really need to ensure that it happens.

We believe in Scotland that, at least in the short term, the best way to protect clinical trials in the UK and their future is to vote for the SNP today in the EU elections. The Government’s handling of Brexit could severely damage, if not ruin, the UK’s reputation as a world leader in medical research, having produced around 25 of the top 100 prescription treatments. The UK currently benefits from access to research funding from EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the Innovative Medicines Initiative.

Innovation and progress are impossible without funding, and it can take many years to get from funding to outcome. Reducing funding now therefore has a negative effect for the future. The UK Government confirmed that Horizon 2020 provides about €80 billion of funding, available over seven years—that is, until 2020—of which the UK has secured £1.5 billion of funding to date, which is 14.3% of the total. Europe is therefore really important to us. Although it has been confirmed that the UK will participate for the remainder of the programme, what will happen in any future programmes remains undetermined.

The Innovative Medicines Initiative has committed more than €5 billion to support large-scale, ambitious research. IMI-supported projects have generated more than 4,000 peer-reviewed projects. From 2008 to 2016, the UK received 28% of total IMI funding from the EU Commission—the largest amount for any country, totalling €302.8 million. UK academic institutions and small and medium-sized enterprises receive the highest levels of IMI funding of any country.

The UK is very successful at conducting clinical trials. It sponsors approximately around 1,500 trials that include other EU countries. Half of those trials will still be occurring in 2019. It is important to collaborate internationally, particularly for rare disease trials, because there are not enough patients in one country alone. Without large-scale drug or medical device approval processes, the approval of drugs and devices could be delayed, resulting in slower access to new treatments for patients. None of us wants that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West on recognising the work of charitable institutions such as Cancer Research UK. It is really important to people throughout the UK that funding and collaboration does not cease, because people are waiting for answers to diseases, some of which have not yet been named. The idea of UK Research and Innovation has not been dealt with; the delegated legislation to deal with it has yet to come to the Floor of the House. We wait with bated breath to see whether the Minister can answer any of my questions to her today.

2 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my fellow London marathon runner. We have run three London marathons together and we always finish in roughly the same time.

Chris Green: Over the past three years, it has been a fantastic experience to be always about two or three minutes behind the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Ashworth: I think the hon. Gentleman beat me three years ago, although I have just beaten him this year.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I didn’t run.

Jonathan Ashworth: I have not yet decided whether to run next year’s marathon, but should we decide to run, it would be great to have you running with us, Mr Hanson—or indeed the Minister.

Marion Fellows: As a fellow Front-Bench spokesperson, may I withdraw from any suggestion that I might run the marathon next year?

Jonathan Ashworth: That is disappointing, but several SNP colleagues ran it this year. Anyway, today’s debate is not about the London marathon—important though it is.

The hon. Member for Bolton West made an excellent speech. I understand that a reshuffle of junior Ministers is going on; based on the quality of his speech, he is very deserving of elevation to the Government Front Bench. He might not want to join it at the moment, but that is a different issue. He well deserves a call from Downing Street.

The hon. Gentleman made some points that muster consensus across the House, as we heard from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). We agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about R&D investment and the implications for medical research and trials post Brexit. If I may gently tease him, I think that he and I were on different sides of the debate in the Brexit referendum. I believe that some of the issues that he raised today were not given the prominence that they deserved in the referendum campaign the first time round. He may disagree, but I think that many of the concerns that he rightly raised will come to the fore and prove particularly damaging for our clinical research if we leave the European Union on World Trade Organisation terms. If that is the prospect that the country faces, I believe that we should have another opportunity to ask the British people whether that is what they want—but, again, I digress.

The hon. Gentleman made an interesting observation about the history of clinical trials. I did not know where the term “limey” came from, so I am pleased that he has educated me on that front. He could also have mentioned Edward Jenner, who was born 270 years ago and who discovered a vaccine for smallpox through a clinical trial. Because of Edward Jenner’s work, the world was rid of smallpox; the World Health Organisation declared the world free of smallpox in 1980, its first and only such declaration about any human disease.

That example brings home the importance not only of clinical trials, but of understanding and being guided by the science, especially in an age when more and more anti-vaccination propaganda and disinformation is spreading far too rapidly on social media—typing in “anti-vax” on Facebook or Instagram brings up all kinds of disturbing, poisonous nonsense. Sadly, while more and more measles outbreaks are happening throughout Europe and in parts of the United Kingdom,
our measles, mumps and rubella vaccination rates are falling. I put on record the importance of being guided by science and understanding the impact and outcomes of clinical trials, which can make a huge difference to saving lives and improving health.

I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman’s well-made point about the £30,000 visa cap. It is not just that the cap will affect the country’s science base and our ability to attract the best scientists, research technicians and so on to our shores; at a time when we have 100,000 vacancies across the national health service, including 40,000 for nurses and thousands for midwives and paramedics, and when hospital trusts are struggling to recruit, it is completely counterproductive for the Government to propose a £30,000 visa cap.

This country has a proud history of the national health service attracting people from across the world, including clinicians, nurses and technicians. Of course our international recruitment should always be ethical, but to hinder the NHS in this way will do huge damage to our ability to attract the staff we need in the future. We are told that the Dido Harding review of the workforce will propose a £30,000 visa cap.

Throughout the 70-year history of the national health service, scientific research and innovation, of which clinical trials have been a part, has made great advances. Sixty years ago, the first mass immunisation programmes offered polio and diphtheria vaccines to under-15s. I think back to the hospital wards full of iron lungs for people suffering from polio; I was not born then, of course, but we have all seen them in grainy black and white photos. What was once an everyday occurrence for too many children in this country is no longer a feature of our national health service—a striking example of the importance of vaccines, research and clinical trials. An everyday aspect of doctors’ and nurses’ care—tending to people in iron lungs in hospital wards—has been completely transformed because of our research and clinical trials.

There have been all kinds of remarkable innovations in the NHS over the past 70 years. We pioneered the first heart transplants here. Forty years ago, we pioneered in vitro fertilisation. We developed CT scanners, MRI scanners and clinical thermometers. We made great advances with DNA. Seminal trials funded by the British Heart Foundation found that aspirin and clot-busting drugs can save lives after a heart attack. Extraordinary, understandable. Medical research has helped to tackle some of the great killers, and people are living longer. That means we have to tackle a different challenge, which brings me to dementia.

It is Dementia Action Week and I pay tribute to all the volunteers across the country who have organised events for people living with dementia. Every three minutes, someone in the UK develops dementia. Almost all of us know someone who has been affected by dementia. Recent mortality statistics show that dementia and Alzheimer’s disease were the leading causes of death in 2017 for the third consecutive year, accounting for more than one in eight of all deaths.

Some 1 million people in the UK will have dementia by 2025, and that figure will increase to 2 million by 2050. That is the equivalent of a 35% increase in the number of people with dementia by 2025, and a 146% increase by 2050. That large projected increase makes finding a treatment to slow or stop dementia as soon as possible absolutely essential. We will not find a cure or a therapy to slow its progress without real investment, innovation, research and clinical trials. There are no treatments yet that can slow the progression or delay the onset of the diseases that cause dementia, but clinical trials are proving crucial for cures and disease-modifying therapies. For example, the progress in understanding the structure of the relevant proteins, by researchers at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, could help identify areas of the proteins that could be targets for future treatment.

Finding a cure for dementia would be revolutionary and it would touch the lives of every single person in this country. That in itself is enough to make the case for continuing clinical trials—to convince us that we should do all we can to continue to invest in medical research and to support clinical trials, as the hon. Member for Bolton West has said.

Across many types of different diseases and disease groups, the importance of clinical trials to finding cures is obvious. Let us take cancer. Cancer Research UK is...
Will the Minister confirm that it is still her position and the position of the Department of Health and Social Care to rule out a no-deal Brexit?

Will the Minister also tell us about the EU clinical trials directive, which, as she knows, governs clinical trials? From 2020, the new EU clinical trial regulation will come into force. As I understand it, the Government have made a commitment to align with the clinical trial regulation, in response to pressure from campaign and charity groups such as Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation and the Wellcome Foundation, which the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned, and to which I pay tribute.

Will the Government confirm that clinical research will remain a negotiating priority with the EU? Will the Minister also confirm that agreement will be reached in the negotiations on the UK’s participation in the single assessment procedure and access to the shared central IT portal and database, which underpin the cross-national clinical trials regulation and come into operation in the next year? Not having access to the portal will severely reduce the ease of setting up UK-EU trials, and will hurt our thriving life sciences environment. As things stand, UK researchers will enter the implementation period unsure of what regulatory conditions they will face when they exit it next year. If the Minister can offer us some guidance on that, we would appreciate it.

The hon. Member for Bolton West and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also mentioned the EU’s Horizon 2020 scheme, which is due to invest billions in health research across the UK over the next couple of years. It is significant funding and its long-term nature is vital to give security to those medical institutions and universities planning major research projects, but institutions are still waiting for clarity from the Government on where we stand with respect to Horizon 2020 post Brexit. Again, I would welcome some clarification from the Minister.

I wonder whether the Minister can say something about transparency. We must ensure there is transparency in all publicly funded medical research. What efforts is the Department making to ensure that UK Research and Innovation and the Medical Research Council publish the results of publicly funded research in a timely manner? She might be aware that a debate is currently raging at the World Health Assembly on an Italian resolution on the transparency of clinical trials, research and development costs, and medicine prices. I understand that the Minister in the Lords, Baroness Blackwood, represented the UK at the World Health Assembly.

The UK is not supporting the resolution that the Italians propose. It might well be that there are very good reasons—around intellectual property rights and so on—why we would not want to support that resolution. However, I would welcome some clarification or explanation from the Minister on why the UK does not support the resolution on transparency, which lots of EU member states including the Netherlands support—others in the EU are not supporting it, but a significant number of EU member states are supporting it. It would be helpful if we could have that on the record, because there is huge concern about the way the pharmaceutical industry operates. We should celebrate its contributions to the economy, but that does not mean we should not hold it to account.
The Minister will know about the very heated debate that has taken place, both in public and between NHS England and Vertex, on the availability of Orkambi for cystic fibrosis sufferers. Frankly, I think Vertex has behaved shamefully. I now understand that the NHS has made Vertex an offer on a two-year managed access arrangement, and I believe it is offering more for Orkambi. I really hope Vertex takes up the offer.

Time after time, we hear stories of pharmaceutical companies acting quite disgracefully. There was another story today, about four pharmaceutical companies colluding over an anti-nausea drug and causing the NHS to spend 700% more on the drug than it should have done. We need more transparency. It might well be that the Government have good reasons for opposing the resolution at the World Health Assembly, and I would welcome the Minister’s explanation. If we cannot support that resolution because of the implications for our life sciences, what are the Government doing internationally to pursue a transparency agenda on R&D, drug pricing and so on?

I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West for securing the debate for this week—I believe we had Clinical Trials Day on Monday. It might well be that other things are going on elsewhere in our constituencies and in the Commons corridors, which is why only a few of us are present, but that does not mean it has not been a high-quality debate. I thank the hon. Gentleman and look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.23 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

I start in a similar vein to my colleagues, by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this really important debate on such a vital issue. I also associate myself with the comments made by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows)—I, too, have absolutely no intention to run the London marathon.

I thank my hon. Friend for taking us on a trip down memory lane back to the early days of our country’s great historical legacy in clinical trials, and back to the days of James Lind. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Lind, because he is synonymous with my home town of Gosport. After his great initial work on the trials for scurvy, he worked at Haslar Hospital, which was one of Europe’s largest institutions for treatments and a Royal Navy hospital. He continued a lot of his valuable work there between 1758 and 1774. He is well known in our area as one of the great stars of Haslar Hospital, and of whose work we are most proud. Once it was eventually rolled out across the Navy, his work undoubtedly saved lives and prevented immeasurable suffering. It was very interesting to hear about those early trials. I would have been very grateful to have been the one having oranges and lemons every day, and not the one having diluted sulphuric acid—I cannot imagine how that would have turned out.

Let me say from the outset that the Government absolutely recognise the importance of clinical research in this country, including clinical trials. As hon. Members have heard, I think it is appropriate to have this debate in the same week as Clinical Trials Day. Clearly, access to world-leading clinical trials and research can offer real hope to patients who suffer from conditions with limited treatment options. We are absolutely committed to continuing to offer patients opportunities to access potentially life-saving treatments through clinical research. For many patients, participating in clinical research can be about more than improving their own condition. Patients feel empowered by having the chance to contribute to the search for a cure that might benefit other patients in the future. I pay tribute to such patients, and to all individuals and organisations working in this important field.

This country is a world leader in clinical research. We have a world-class science base and three of the top 10 globally ranked universities. Centres such as Moorfields, Birmingham, the Christie and the Royal Marsden are undertaking vital, world-leading cancer trials and research. UK-based scientists have won more than 80 Nobel prizes in chemistry, physics and medicine. Indeed, 25 of the world’s 100 most-used medicines were developed in the UK, using a public and philanthropic research infrastructure that is, pound for pound, more effective than anywhere else on earth. We have to be very proud of that.

We continue to punch above our weight in many areas, and rank second globally—behind only the United States—in the number of clinical trials delivered. Our regulatory environment is forward-thinking and pragmatic, and it welcomes innovation. Through the National Institute for Health Research, the Government are investing over £1 billion a year to fund research and provide the skills and facilities to enable high-quality research in our health and care system. Through its people, proud institutions for treatments and a Royal Navy hospital.

The UK’s life sciences sector contributes almost £74 billion a year and supports close to a quarter of a million jobs across the country. In addition, members of the Association of Medical Research Charities support over one third of all publicly funded medical research in the UK, investing over £1.6 billion in health research in 2018-19—acting on the commitment in the NHS Long Term Plan.

In 2017-18, the NIHR’s early transitional research infrastructure generated more than £231 million of industry research investment, supported over 1,770 industry-collaborative and contract research studies, filed 199 patents and created five spin-out companies. The NIHR Clinical Research Network announced this week that a record 870,000 people took part in network-supported clinical research studies in 2018-19, including over 81,000 in children’s research studies. That is a huge increase from the previous year.

The UK’s life sciences sector contributes almost £74 billion a year and supports close to a quarter of a million jobs across the country. In addition, members of the Association of Medical Research Charities support over one third of all publicly funded medical research in the UK, investing over £1.6 billion in health research in 2016. Our NHS has a track record of being very active in research, with 100% of trusts and 38% of GP surgeries in England delivering some form of clinical research in 2018-19—acting on the commitment in the NHS constitution to conduct and use research to improve the health and care of the population. Clinical research does not benefit only the patients who participate; evidence has shown that NHS trusts that are active in clinical research deliver better overall clinical outcomes.

Strong clinical research unlocks a virtuous circle for patients, the economy and the NHS. Part of the stimulus for the growth of this sector is the Government’s commitment to reach a target of investing 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027, and 3% in the long term. That places us in the top quartile of OECD countries, as we heard from my hon. Friend.
The life sciences industrial strategy sets out the vision to build on that and make the UK a top-tier global hub for biomedical and clinical research. The two life sciences sector deals, published in 2017 and 2018, have already transformed a significant part of the strategy into Government policy. They are no lightweight commitment. Taken together, they have leveraged more than £2 billion in private sector investment in the life sciences sector, supported by more than £500 million from the Government. The second sector deal set out the Government’s clear ambition to see faster, more efficient clinical research. NHS England’s long-term plan confirmed that the NHS endorses and will play its full part in delivering the life sciences sector deals, and set out our ambition to see 1 million people registered to participate in health research by 2023-24, and to treble commercial research in the health system over the next 10 years.

The Government are committed to creating the very best environment for clinical trials, both to achieve the ambition set out in the life sciences industrial strategy and to prepare for exiting the EU, about which hon. Members have spoken. The system is coming together to deliver that. The implementation of Health Research Authority approval has streamlined processes and led to improvements in the timelines for clinical trial approvals. It is now possible for efficient clinical trials to be set up in the UK within 100 days from first regulatory application to the first participant recruited.

This week, the NIHR published a policy on clinical trial transparency, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West asked. The policy aims to improve practice in prospective registration and timely disclosure of results to ensure full transparency of clinical trials funded by the NIHR. It sits within and is consistent with the Health Research Authority’s UK policy framework for health and social care research, and guidance on the publication and dissemination of research findings. The Government’s arm’s length bodies and partners are committed to clinical trials transparency. The Health Research Authority has an active work programme on transparency, and later in the year will launch a consultation to improve it further.

NHS England and the NIHR are implementing their “12 Actions to Support and Apply Research in the NHS”, which sets out a vision for further simplifying and strengthening clinical research within the NHS in England. In the summer, the NIHR clinical research network will launch a competition to establish five purpose-designed centres dedicated to late-phase commercial research within the NHS, launched as part of the second life sciences sector deal. Increasing the NHS’s capacity to deliver research will enable significant growth and will provide more opportunities for patients to benefit from early access to innovation. Our vision is to make the UK home to data-driven research, scientific advances and innovation in healthcare. It is all about improving patient outcomes. To help that, we have committed £37.5 million through the life sciences sector deals to develop up to five digital innovation hubs.

The UK is also leading the way in improving clinical trial designs, undertaking novel and more efficient trial designs that will develop new medicines, diagnostics and medical devices for patients. Although a record 870,000 people took part in the NIHR clinical research network-supported studies in 2018-19, the network is also exploring mechanisms to ensure that all patients are offered the opportunity to participate in research that is relevant to them, whether or not it is delivered by their regular healthcare provider. With that in mind, the NIHR recently launched a new website called “Be Part of Research”, which helps people to find out easily about health research of relevance to them taking place across the UK, not just in their own areas. NHS patients will be able to view opportunities to participate and register their interest in research via the NHS app by 2020.

As part of Brexit negotiations, which a lot of Members mentioned, we are working to ensure that we continue to have the best possible environment in which to support clinical trials. Our overall aim is to ensure that patients in the UK and across the EU continue to be able to access the very best and most innovative medicine. As part of our preparations for leaving the EU, the Government are working across a great number of areas to ensure that the UK has the best possible environment for basic, biomedical, health and life sciences research.

Chris Green: Does the Minister understand my concern that, although many people from the life sciences sector are involved in Parliament in one way or another and visit it, and are aware of what Brexit means and the challenges around it, for many people in the sector, which is very international in its nature and supportive of remaining in the EU, information about what the Government are doing and their intentions is not as widespread as it might be? Therefore, the Government need to do more and be more effective in communicating what we are doing on Brexit and why we are doing it.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is quite right. We must do everything we can to communicate and reassure individuals in the UK and across the rest of the EU about our intentions. We have a strong track record of working together to tackle global challenges, and there are strong links in place between our research and innovation communities. We want to maintain that and build on it as best we can. We want to continue collaborating in areas of shared interest through the ongoing partnerships. We perhaps need to do a better job of communicating that. I hope that today’s debate will help to that end, so I congratulate my hon. Friend again on securing it.

My hon. Friend spoke about access to global talent. Through the NIHR Academy, we are investing in the development and co-ordination of NIHR academic training, career development and research capacity development. Clinical trials training is supported from pre-doctoral training right the way through to senior post-doctoral research through a range of awards as part of the NIHR fellowships programme. More than half of the UK’s research output is the result of international collaboration, and the most pressing global scientific challenges of today require scientists from around the world to work together across borders. The UK Government are absolutely committed to continuing to participate fully in all international scientific endeavours, including through pooling and sharing resources and infrastructure with other countries. Hon. Members have raised concerns about that. We are also making it easier to recruit and retain overseas researchers and scientists. We want to ensure that the new regime works for life sciences companies, and supports the recruitment of skilled and talented people without excessive bureaucracy, which often gets in the way.
In September 2018, the independent Migration Advisory Committee reported on the economic and social impacts of the UK’s exit from the EU and on how the immigration system should be aligned with a modern industrial strategy. That includes removing the number cap on the skilled workers route and removal of the resident market labour test. Hon. Members will know that the White Paper currently retains the £30,000 minimum threshold, but the Government have committed to 12 months of extensive engagement with employers on the future of the immigration system to ensure that it works and to address any concerns that have been raised. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) mentioned other medical and health staff. He will know that nurses and paramedics are already on the exempted professions list. In the 2019 spring statement, the Chancellor announced that we would be completely exempting PhD-qualified migrants from visa caps.

On accessing EU funding, should Parliament pass the withdrawal agreement, the UK will continue to participate in EU science programmes until the end of 2020 through the withdrawal agreement, and the Government would very much like the option to associate to programmes beyond 2020, including the Horizon Europe programme, which has been mentioned. As a contingency in the event that the withdrawal agreement is not ratified, the Government have guaranteed funding for scientists and innovators who secure awards before EU exit and those who are successful in EU competitions on a third-country basis after exit.

The EU and the UK start from a position of close regulatory alignment. The EU has created a comprehensive scheme for the regulation of clinical trials of medicines through the clinical trials directive and the good clinical practice directive, both of which have been transposed into UK law through the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004. The EU is planning to implement new regulations for clinical trials in 2020, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West knows, which will further integrate clinical trial processes and requirements across the EU. Ministers have stated that the Government have committed to align with the EU’s new clinical trials regulation as far as we possibly can without delay when it comes into force in the UK, subject to usual parliamentary approvals.

Our preferred future relationship includes the UK’s involvement in all of the elements of EU regulation that are not in the UK’s gift—namely, the EU common portal and single assessment framework. Of course, that is subject to negotiations, which are ongoing.

Regardless of EU exit, the MHRA and partners across the UK healthcare ecosystem are already taking steps to improve further the clinical trials application process. That will ensure that those engaged in clinical trials can continue to develop innovative and cost-effective treatments, and that patients recruited in trials can continue to have safe and prompt access to medicines.

Once the UK is outside the EU network, it will still be possible for sponsors to run multi-state trials involving the UK. Data generated in a UK clinical trial will also be admissible to support regulatory activity in the EU and globally. The MHRA and UK ethics committees will make every effort to ensure that any parallel submissions to the UK are streamlined and efficient, for example by accepting the same application dossier and offering competitive timelines for assessment.

For medical devices and in vitro diagnostics, the new EU regulations entered into force in May 2017, with three and five-year transition periods respectively. The MHRA leads on the UK regulatory framework for medical devices and IVDs, including the appropriate alignment with international standards.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Information Commissioner’s Office and NHS England have all published EU exit operational readiness guidelines, including the actions that organisations need to take to ensure continuity of access to the processing and sharing of personal information and data.

I hope that I have made it clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West that we are fully committed not just to keeping pace with the rest of the world, but to taking strides ahead despite the uncertainty that we face with EU exit. The life sciences industrial strategy sets out the blueprint for that, and we continue to make rapid progress on implementation, to the benefit of the UK population, patients, the NHS and our economy.

Chris Green: This debate has been very positive on both sides of the Chamber. We see the challenges ahead with Brexit. We do not know at the moment when, if or how we will leave, but all of us in the Chamber and more widely across the country recognise the immense contribution that our scientific community makes, whether that involves the private sector, academia or our fantastic charitable research sector. We have a very positive future. Our consensus on increasing and improving our investment in research and development and devoting a greater part of our national budget to it sends the very positive message, not just to the United Kingdom but across the world, that we are a place to invest in, locate in and move to in order to participate. I thank everyone who spoke in the debate very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the matter of supporting clinical trials and the UK’s future clinical research capability.

2.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statement

*Monday 13 May 2019*

**JUSTICE**

**Court and Tribunal Estate Consultation**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 10 May I published the response to the “Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate” consultation. It sets out how decisions regarding the future of the estate should be made and makes clear that people will continue to be able to access courts and tribunals while providing value for money for the taxpayer and ensuring long-term efficiency.

The consultation published in January 2018, has been developed to complement HMCTS’ £1 billion reform programme, which is bringing new technology and modern ways of working to the justice system, making it more accessible for everyone. It received 249 responses and as a result, the response published today, strengthens and updates the principles underpinning future decisions relating to changes to our estate. It ensures that:

- When visits to courts are necessary, travel times and ease of transport will continue to be prioritised— with added support for vulnerable users
- Court and tribunal buildings will be fit for purpose and can be maintained at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer
- Specialist front-of-house staff will be at courts to support the public and legal professionals, and will be trained in new technologies
- The estate is aligned with the reform programme

The provision for hearings in physical court rooms will remain essential for the fair, just and proportionate delivery of justice. Yet we anticipate that fewer interactions with the court and tribunals system will happen in this way. Any future changes to the court estate which result in the relocation of a service from a local area will be consulted on publicly before a decision is made, using the criteria set out in the Fit for the Future principles.

We expect the modernisation being delivered by the reform programme to provide additional routes to justice and as a result lead to a reduction in the use of our court and tribunal buildings. These modern channels will be additional to, rather than substitutions for, existing routes. We make a commitment that we will not act on assumptions by proposing to close courts unless we have sound evidence that the reforms are actually reducing the use of those buildings.

Naturally, with an estate of this size there may be changes in demand for reasons other than uptake of digital services, and in those circumstances, it may be sensible to close or merge courts. Furthermore, this consultation has no effect on previously announced closures which will go ahead as planned.

Our response to the consultation addresses several concerns which we have committed to improving. One is that journeys to and from court should be reasonable and, for the overwhelming majority of users, this would be one that allowed them to leave home no earlier than 7.30am, attend their hearing and return home by 7.30pm the same day by public transport. We also set out how we will measure this commitment and what other factors we will consider, for example, the circumstances of users including those that are vulnerable.

The consultation was broadly positive about proposals regarding the design of our court and tribunal buildings and reinforced the need for the security of those who use and work in our courts and tribunals to be paramount and for ensuring suitable facilities for vulnerable users. This is reflected in the new “Court and tribunal design guide” published today.

Our revised principles will strengthen and guide our analysis and assessment when we consider future changes. It will better align the management of our estate to the wider modernisation of our services and will make sure the court and tribunal estate remains fit for the 21st century.

**Court and tribunal design guide**

Alongside fit for the future, HMCTS has also published a new Court and tribunal design guide. This has been developed after engaging with user groups, to make sure the guide improves the experience for court and tribunal users, while providing value for the taxpayer.

It provides the standards for refurbishment and redevelopment of existing and future court and tribunal buildings. It aims to enable optimum use of facilities and improve user experience and, along with the key elements of safety and security, sets out five principles that must be incorporated into any building design. These principles define that court and tribunal buildings must be appropriate, effective, accessible, flexible and sustainable.

The guide was developed through extensive engagement with court and tribunal users to ensure standards and designs meet their needs. The “fit for the future” consultation sought views on the proposed principles and approach to improving the design of court and tribunal buildings and a total of 181 responses were received.

The guide will be used by HMCTS to help inform current and future building and refurbishment work undertaken across the court and tribunal estate. As lessons are learned and HMCTS reform initiatives develop, the design guide will be updated.

A copy of the consultation response has been placed in the libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1554]
Written Statements

Tuesday 14 May 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Agriculture and Fisheries Council
takes place in Brussels on 14 May.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus
for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agricultural
policy (CAP) reform package. Ministers will exchange
views on the new delivery model in the regulation on
CAP strategic plans.

Member states will also exchange views on the
agricultural aspects of the Commission’s communication
titled “Clean Planet for all: strategic long-term vision
for a climate neutral economy”.

The Commission will then provide an update on the
performance of EU agricultural trade after which Ministers
will hold an exchange of views.

There are currently three items scheduled for discussion
under ‘any other business’:

Information from the Netherlands delegation on the
judgement of the Court of Justice on organisms obtained by
mutagenesis (case C-528/16).

Information from the Spanish and French delegations on
the regulation on the European maritime and fisheries fund.

Information by the Belgian delegation on the situation in
the fruit sector for apples and pears.

[HCWS1555]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT

Local Government Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and
Local Government (James Brokenshire): On 29 November
2018 I told the House that I was launching a statutory
consultation on the proposal for reorganising local
government in Northamptonshire which I had received
from seven of the area’s eight principal councils. The
councils had submitted this proposal in response to the
telephone survey of Northamptonshire residents and an open
questionnaire.

Ninety per cent of respondents to the telephone
survey agreed that there was a need to make changes to
Northamptonshire local government and 74% agreed
with the unitary proposal; 83% of the over 6000 individuals
who responded to the telephone survey agreed that there
was a need for change, with 67% agreeing that a
number of unitary councils should be introduced and
44% supporting the proposal for two unitary councils.

I have now carefully considered the councils’ proposal,
along with the results of the consultation exercises, a
report by the Northamptonshire Children’s Commissioner,
submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of
State for Education and me, on how best to ensure
continued improvement of the fragile children’s social
care service in Northamptonshire in the context of
reorganisation, and all other relevant information and
material available to me. I have concluded that the
proposal meets our publicly stated criteria for local government
reorganisation. If implemented, I am satisfied
that the proposal would improve local government and
service delivery in the area, has a good deal of local
support and the area of each new unitary represents a
credible local geography.

This is on the basis that there is a children’s trust
covering the whole of Northamptonshire, which, with
my support, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of
State for Education is minded to establish, as recommended
by the Children’s Commissioner, if the unitary proposal
is to be implemented. With such an arrangement children’s
social care would not be disaggregated with the trust
discharging functions on behalf of both councils. My
right hon. Friend will be publishing the Commissioner’s
report today. It is also on the basis that work continues
to be taken forward in Northamptonshire to do more to
integrate adult social care and health services.

I have therefore decided, subject to the issuing of
statutory directions requiring the establishment of a
children’s trust and to parliamentary approval of the
secondary legislation, to use my powers under the local
government and public involvement in Health Act 2007
to implement the proposal. These powers enable me to
implement a unitary proposal with or without modification
and in this case, having carefully considered all the
material available to me, I have decided to make one
modification to the proposal.

This is to extend the period for fully implementing
the new arrangements so that the new councils are
operational from 1 April 2021. While I recognise that a
delay in implementation will mean potential savings estimated in the proposal will not be realised for another year. I am clear that the extended implementation period means we can be confident that there will be a safe and effective transition to all the new service delivery arrangements across the whole of the area, including for those crucial services supporting the most vulnerable. Throughout this extended period my Commissioners will be able to continue to support the County Council.

To support the transition, I have decided to establish shadow authorities. I envisage the May 2020 local elections in Northamptonshire will be elections to those shadow authorities rather than to district councils, with the district elections currently due on that date being cancelled. In line with the approach in the proposal for elections to the new unitary councils, I also envisage the elections to the shadow authorities are held on the basis of three member wards resulting in the North Northamptonshire Council having 78 members and West Northamptonshire Council having 93 members. Those so elected would be members of the new councils when these go live in April 2021. Elections to parish councils will proceed as scheduled in May 2020. I intend to confirm these electoral arrangements shortly after hearing any views the district and county councils may have on this.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decisions. Establishing these new unitary councils will be a significant step towards ensuring the people and businesses across Northamptonshire can in future have the sustainable, high-quality local services they deserve. I welcome the commitment of all the existing councils and their partners to drive forward this process of establishing new councils and transforming local service delivery. I am confident this will continue.

[HCWS1556]
Written Statements

Wednesday 15 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Nuclear Energy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson):

Government’s preparations for the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom mean that the UK now has all the necessary measures in place to ensure that the UK nuclear industry can continue to operate with certainty in all situations.

On 22 February the UK and Japan signed an exchange of notes confirming how the terms of our existing 1998 nuclear co-operation agreement will operate in the context of the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom.

The Nuclear Safeguards (Fissionable Material And Relevant International Agreements) (EU exit) Regulations 2019 and the Nuclear Safeguards (EU exit) Regulations 2019 have been made. This means that Government have put in place all legislation needed ahead of the UK leaving Euratom to ensure that it can now operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state, and that civil nuclear trade can continue.


Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government’s implementation of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. The report covers the three-month reporting period from 26 December to 26 March and is the third statutory report under section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018. The next report on Euratom exit progress is due to be deposited in July 2019.

[HCWS1557]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Recovery Champion

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In the 2017 drug strategy the Government committed to appointing a national recovery champion. The recovery champion will play a key role in delivering the Government’s ambitions by helping improve the prospects of individuals seeking to recover from substance misuse.

I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Dr Edward Day to the role of recovery champion. This appointment is for three years, with Dr Day’s appointment commencing on 15 May 2019 and ending on 14 May 2022. The recovery champion role will extend to England only.

Dr Day has a wealth of experience in the substance misuse field, dealing directly with those who are dependent on drugs as well as informing national guidance and debate. He was one of the first within the field to champion the recovery agenda and to embed it successfully in local services. I am confident that he will make effective use of his considerable experience and extensive knowledge in drug and alcohol treatment and recovery in this role.

It is clear that substance misuse has a hugely damaging impact on individuals, families and communities. To support effective recovery outcomes across the country, Dr Day will work towards galvanising partners at national and local levels, offering advice to local partners on how evidence-based practice can be most effectively applied, and supporting collaboration at a national level through the Drug Strategy Board.

[HCWS1558]
Written Statements

Thursday 16 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

ENABLE Guarantee Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): ENABLE guarantee is a scheme administered by the British Business Bank that encourages participating banks and other financial institutions to lend more to small and medium-sized enterprises by either addressing the high capital consumption associated with such lending for banks or by reducing the cost of funding for other financial institutions in order to increase the supply and diversity of finance to SMEs.

British Business Bank programmes are supporting more than £5.9 billion of finance to over 82,000 smaller businesses (as at September 2018). The Department has approved guarantee facilities totalling £1 billion within the ENABLE programme.

We are now extending the scheme to other financial institutions (as defined in the request for proposals available on the British Business Bank’s website), in order to further increase the diversity of supply of funding available to SMEs. This extension will not create a new contingent liability.

The aggregate amount of the guarantees issued by the Department under the scheme is expected to be circa £2 billion, with extension beyond this subject to further review. Within this £2 billion, the aggregate notional amount of the guarantees extended to other financial institutions is capped at £400 million. This enables the Department to manage its risk appetite and limit its credit risk exposure.

As a matter of record, I will be laying a departmental minute today.

[HCWS1560]

Industrial Strategy (West Midlands)

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our modern industrial strategy is a long-term plan to boost productivity and earning power for people throughout the country.

Since 2010, local leaders, working in partnership with Government, have delivered historic city deals with Greater Birmingham and Solihull, Coventry and Warwickshire and the Black Country. Having secured significant growth deal funding, the west midlands then came together as one to capitalise on these important new powers and establish new leadership through two successful devolution deals.

Building on these strong foundations, we set out in the modern industrial strategy to work in partnership with places to develop local industrial strategies. Local industrial strategies are central to our aim of creating prosperous communities across the country. They are being developed locally and agreed with Government. They are long term, based on clear evidence and aligned to the modern industrial strategy.

Today we launched the first of these strategies—the west midlands local industrial strategy. This has been developed locally by the West Midlands Combined Authority, led by Mayor Andy Street, supported by the local enterprise partnerships and agreed with Government.

This strategy sets out how, in partnership with west midlands local leaders, we will work to deliver on a range of commitments including:

- delivering on our future of mobility grand challenge, which aims to be at the forefront of the development of cleaner, safer, easier and more reliable future modes of transport, cementing the west midlands’ position as the UK’s automotive heartlands;
- playing a leading role in the UK’s trials of connected autonomous vehicles, with the west midlands aiming to deploy the first fully operational connected autonomous vehicles in advance of the 2022 Commonwealth games;
- driving investment into electric vehicle manufacturing in the region, completing the UK battery industrialisation centre and maximising the impact of the Faraday battery challenge; putting the west midlands at the heart of transport innovation in the UK by delivering the UK’s first large-scale 5G test bed; and
- helping meet the artificial intelligence and data grand challenge by supporting the development of a west midlands translational medicine and med-tech commission to accelerate the “lab to patient” ecosystem.

The west midlands is a global force and a major part of the UK economy, generating £99 billion of GVA—5% of UK output. The region is growing fast, with output up 27% over the past five years. A record number of people are in work and the lowest number are out of work. Productivity is increasing too, at twice the rate of the UK in 2017-18, while carbon emissions have reduced by 18% over the last five years—showing that while we grow our economy we can reduce the impact on our planet.

The west midlands is a region in renaissance. Together, this work sets the long-term future for how the west midlands can fully realise its potential.

A copy of the west midlands industrial strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1559]

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and Common Frameworks

The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved administrations regarding common frameworks in the third reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

A copy of the “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks - 26 December 2018 to 25 March 2019” report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency.

[HCWS1565]

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 17 May 2019. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

**Early morning session**

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 16 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers will then discuss the possibility of the European Investment Bank developing country strategies.

**Excise duties**

The Council will be invited to reach a political agreement on the directive on general arrangements for excise duty (recast), the regulation on administrative co-operation of the content of electronic registers, and the directive on the structures of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages.

**Economic and monetary union**

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the way forward in areas of the economic and monetary union, specifically in regards to the reform support programme.

**Current financial services legislative proposals**

The Romanian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

**International meetings**

The presidency and Commission will update the Council on the outcomes of the G20, IMF and World Bank spring meetings that took place in April, and the Council will be invited to approve the terms of reference for the upcoming G20 meeting in June.

The Council will then hold a policy debate on digital taxation in the international context, and the Finnish delegation will de brief the Council on the first meeting of the Finance Ministers coalition for climate action.

**European semester**

The Council will be invited to adopt conclusions on the outcomes of the 2019 in-depth reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure; and the implementation of 2018 country-specific recommendations.

**Institutional cycle priorities**

The presidency will inform the Council on the follow-up discussions in regards to priorities for the next institutional cycle in the ECOFIN area.

**Working lunch**

Following on from the discussions at April informal ECOFIN in Bucharest, EU Finance Ministers will hold a working lunch to discuss the challenges of labour mobility and their potential solutions.

[HCWS1564]

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**Iraq: Export Licence System**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This statement updates and supersedes the written ministerial statement of 11 November 2010 on the “Iraq: Export Licence System” (Official Report, 11 November 2010: column 24WS).

UN Security Council resolution 1546 of 2004 (UNSCR 1546) includes an exemption to the arms embargo on Iraq for supplies of arms and related matériel required by the Government of Iraq (GoI) or the multinational force to serve the purposes of the resolution. The written ministerial statement on 11 November 2010 stated that Her Majesty’s Government would consider as exempt from the embargo exports to the GoI, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, diplomatic missions in Iraq, the US forces in Iraq, the NATO training mission in Iraq, the UK naval training mission training the Iraqi navy and entities contracted or subcontracted to the GoI, US or UK forces or NATO.

In the light of the deployment of military forces of non-NATO EU countries in Iraq and in accordance with the GoI request for international support, the Government wish to make clear that they consider as exempt from the embargo exports serving the purposes of UNSCR 1546 to the forces of EU as well as NATO countries deployed in Iraq at the request of the GoI. The Government also wish to make clear that they consider exports serving the same purposes to United Nations agencies present in Iraq at the request of the GoI, and their contractors and subcontractors, as exempt from the embargo.

Accordingly, the Government consider as exempt from the embargo exports to the GoI, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN agencies in Iraq, diplomatic missions in Iraq, the NATO [training] mission in Iraq, the forces of NATO or EU countries in Iraq, and entities contracted or subcontracted to the GoI, NATO, the forces of such NATO or EU countries, UNAMI or such UN agencies. As in the statement of 11 November 2010, export licence applications to these end users will not therefore require the approval of the GoI prior to approval of the application but may require extra information to be provided by the entity seeking the export licence. For exports serving the purposes of UNSCR 1546 to entities other than these, the exporter is required to provide a supporting document from the GoI to demonstrate that the proposed export is required and thus exempt from the embargo. All export licence
applications for Iraq as elsewhere will be assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria and the Government will not issue a licence where to do so would be inconsistent with the criteria.

[NCWS1561]

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) has replaced the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS1562]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU JHA Opt-in: Cyber-crime

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government have decided not to opt into (under the UK’s JHA opt-in protocol) either the proposed EU Council decision to participate in the negotiations of the second additional protocol to the cyber-crime (“Budapest”) convention or the proposed EU Council decision to authorise EU-US negotiations on a cross-border data access agreement.

The first proposed Council decision enables the EU Commission to participate in negotiations relating to the second additional protocol to the Council of Europe cyber-crime (“Budapest”) convention, on behalf of the European Union.

The second proposed Council decision authorises the EU Commission to commence negotiations with the US on an EU-US international data access agreement, with the aim of ensuring compliance by US-established service providers to requests from EU member states for stored electronic content. The US’s Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data (CLOUD) Act provides that only an international agreement between the US and a foreign Government can allow for such compliance by US established service providers.

I have decided not to opt into the EU Council decision on participating in the second additional protocol to the Council of Europe Budapest convention to ensure that the UK is able to negotiate its own position and interests, without being limited or bound by the EU negotiation policy. This includes enabling the UK to ensure that a flexible approach is taken in negotiating the protocol to accommodate the different systems and processes of a wide range of participant states (beyond the participating EU member states).

The UK is already in the process of negotiating its own reciprocal UK-US data access agreement, a bilateral treaty (as required under the CLOUD Act) that enables US companies to comply with lawful orders from UK authorities for the production of electronic communications without any conflict of law. As such my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Policing and the Fire Service has decided not to opt into the Council decision on opening EU-US negotiations on cross-border data access. This is in line with the UK’s decision not to opt into the draft EU e-evidence regulation, which sets internal EU rules relating to the production of electronic communications.

Until the UK leaves the EU we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s opt-in to EU legislation on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our ability to protect the public.

[HCWS1563]
Written Statements

Monday 20 May 2019

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Facility Time Guidance

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I wish to update the House on the progress being made to monitor trade union facility time usage within the public sector.

The Trade Union (Facility Time Publication Requirements) Regulations 2017 came into force on 1 April 2017, requiring public sector organisations who employ over 49 full-time equivalent employees to publish information relating to trade union usage/spend.

The Government are today publishing updated guidance to support organisations to meet this important legislative requirement. On 3 June we will launch a new online recording system as part of the facility time publication service, enabling all public sector organisations to centrally submit facility time data by the deadline of 31 July. All organisations should report facility time data before this date, and guidance to this effect is included in the tool.

The Government recognise that there are significant benefits to both employers and employees when organisations and unions work together effectively to deliver high-quality public services, but facility time within the public sector must be accountable and represent value for money.

For 2017-18, compliance varied considerably across the wider public sector, with returns in some areas of just over 60%. The civil service saw the highest levels of compliance, with just over 99% of expected returns received.

Returns to the civil service show a 0.06% spend on facility time as a percentage of the pay bill, demonstrating greater accountability and an effective use of taxpayers’ money. Measures taken to encourage these sensible savings include reforms that require trade union representatives to spend at least 50% of their time delivering their civil service job. Average spend across the public sector was higher, especially in local government.

The Government encourage all public sector organisations to reduce facility time spend to the levels seen in the civil service, in order to ensure it achieves value for money. The Government estimate these potential savings amount to £14 million across the public sector.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Border Arrangements

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I am pleased to inform the House that from today visitors and entry clearance holders from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States will be able to use e-passport gates at all 15 UK airports and juxtaposed controls where they are in operation. I am further pleased to inform the House that from today the requirement to complete a landing card will be removed for passengers of any nationality arriving in the UK.

Allowing these seven nationalities to use e-passport gates and removing the requirement for arriving passengers of any nationality to complete a landing card will allow us to control our borders in a way that works to the UK’s best interests, while also demonstrating to the rest of the world that Britain is absolutely open for business.

The vast majority of these nationals arriving in the UK will be eligible to use e-passport gates, with only some groups coming for specific migration purposes still needing to see a Border Force officer on arrival, for instance short-term students who do not hold a visa.

The expansion of e-passport gate eligibility to eligible travellers from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States was first announced in the Budget last year. I further announced on 3 December 2018 that this expansion would also include eligible travellers from Singapore and South Korea.

Introducing these changes has required a large body of work to be completed, including the introduction of a statutory instrument allowing the seven nationalities to use e-passport gates, which was laid before the House on 3 December 2018 and came into force on 11 March 2019. The decision to withdraw landing cards for all passengers has been taken following a public consultation, the response to which I am placing in the Library of the House today.

I am pleased that we have been able to introduce these changes ahead of schedule.
The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our armed forces, who perform exceptional feats in incredibly difficult circumstances to protect this country. We set the highest standards of personal behaviour and conduct for our personnel, and rightly hold them to account when they fall short of these expectations. Service personnel must comply with service law (which includes the requirement to comply with the criminal law of England and Wales) whenever they are on operations, regardless of where those operations take place.

This Government are strongly opposed to our service personnel and veterans being subject to repeated investigations in connection with historical operations many years after the events in question, and want not to repeat the type of situation that has evolved under the Iraq Historical Allegations Team (IHAT). Our veterans, many now elderly and frail, face the considerable trauma of being subject to drawn-out investigations—even when ultimately there is no case to answer—and the threat of potential prosecution. This does not serve justice, and the prospect of vexatious allegations has the potential to limit operational effectiveness.

To address the basic unfairness of repeated investigations many years after the event, I intend to undertake a short public consultation on measures which I believe should be taken forward in legislation. One of the measures this consultation will include is a statutory presumption against prosecution of current or former personnel for alleged offences committed outside the UK in the course of duty more than 10 years previously, and which have been the subject of a previous investigation. This is not the same as a statute of limitations or amnesty, but it will mean that prosecutions in such circumstances should not be considered to be in the public interest, except in “exceptional circumstances”.

Our obligations to veterans who have served in Northern Ireland remain the same as those who served in other theatres. I have agreed with the Northern Ireland Secretary that my Department will provide formal input to any process taken forward by the Northern Ireland Office resulting from the Stormont House agreement. I understand the importance of making sure this process is fair and has the trust of all sides, supporting the commitments of the UK and Irish Governments to the Belfast agreement and to peace in Northern Ireland. In this spirit, we intend to share our considerable experience of the practical difficulties of investigating historical allegations from Iraq and Afghanistan and the unintended consequences that resulted from it, and the impact this has had on armed forces personnel. Veterans’ voices need to continue to be heard and the lessons of IHAT need to be learned.

IHAT was established with the best of intentions but was hijacked by unscrupulous lawyers who argued for an expansion of our investigative obligations. It spiralled from a two-year investigation into around 100 allegations to more than 3,500 allegations. Public Interest Lawyers—which closed in 2016 and whose principal, Phil Shiner, was subsequently struck off—repeatedly argued in court both for an increase in the number of cases that should be investigated and that investigations were taking too long. Between 2014 and 2016, this firm alone notified the MOD of allegations—of unlawful killing or ill-treatment—by around 1,200 people. Of the many thousands of allegations put to IHAT, only a small proportion merited full investigation and only a handful might lead to a prosecution. There are many cases where the investigation found evidence that UK service personnel had acted in self-defence, in the defence of others, and lawfully. In some cases, allegations appear to have been completely fabricated.

In an operational context, I also want to remind the House of the announcement made by the Government in October 2016 that we intend to derogate from the European convention on human rights before we embark on significant future military operations, where this is appropriate in the precise circumstances of the operation in question. Any derogation would need to be justified and could only be made from certain articles of the convention. In the event of such a derogation, our armed forces will continue to operate to the highest standards and be subject to the rule of law. I have instructed my Department to work across Government on how derogation might apply in the different possible circumstances of future conflicts.

In relation to providing improved support, I am committed to delivering better compensation for those injured, or the families of those killed on combat operations, by bringing forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows. This would seek to establish a no-fault scheme that will pay the same level of compensation as a court would award. This will be of considerable benefit to service personnel and their families, who will no longer have to pursue lengthy and stressful claims in the court.

I also intend looking again at possible options which would prevent civil claims being brought in respect of historical events overseas.

I will keep this House informed as we move forward with these proposals.

[HCWS1575]
Youth

This session will begin with the adoption of the Council conclusions on young people and the future of work. Furthermore, the Council will also seek to adopt a resolution on the governance of the EU Youth dialogue. Also tabled for this session is a policy debate on young people as agents of democracy in the EU.

Other

There will be information from the European Commission in regards to Discover EU and information from the Portuguese delegation on the World Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth 2019 and Youth Forum Lisboa (22 and 23 June 2019).

Culture-Audiovisual

This meeting will begin with the adoption of the Council conclusions on young creative generations. In addition, the meeting will also look to adopt conclusions on co-productions. This shall be followed with a policy debate on ‘from tackling disinformation to rebuilding EU citizens’ trust in the media’.

Other

Information will be provided from the Hungarian delegation on the nomination of Vesxprem for the European Capital of Culture 2023. Moreover, information will also be provided from the Spanish and Portuguese delegation on celebrating the fifth centenary of the first circumnavigation of the world, led by Fernao de Magalhaes and Juan Sebastian Elcano.

Sport

The sport session of EYCS will begin with the adoption of a resolution on EU member states’ representation and coordination for the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Montreal. In addition, there will also be the adoption of the Council Conclusions on access to sport for persons with disabilities.

The session shall then proceed with a policy debate on increasing the participation of children and young people in sport in 21st century Europe.

Other

There will be information from the EU member states’ representatives in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) Foundation Board on the meeting with the WADA taking place in Montreal on the 14-16th May 2019. There will also be information from the Finnish presidency on the work programme of the incoming presidency and information from the Danish delegation about the Council of Europe Convention on the manipulation of sports competitions (match fixing) and the ways forward for the EU.

To conclude, there will be information from the Bulgarian, Greek and Romanian delegations on the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia to host either the Euro 2028 championship or the 2030 World cup. [HCWS1573]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 21 May 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member state and continue to act in good faith.

The provisional agenda includes: Multianual financial framework 2021-27

Ministers and the Commission will discuss progress on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations. The intention is to reach an agreement on the negotiations in autumn 2019.

Preparation of the European Council on 20-21 June 2019: annotated draft agenda

The Council will discuss the draft agenda for the June European Council. The agenda is expected to comprise: the adoption of the 2019-24 strategic agenda for the European Union, MFF, climate change, the European semester, and the disinformation and elections report prepared by the Romanian presidency in co-operation with the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The presidency will also provide Ministers with an update on progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions.

[HCWS1568]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Learning Disabilities Mortality Review Programme

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I am announcing today the publication of the third annual report of the Learning Disabilities Mortality Review Programme (LeDeR). A copy has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The LeDeR programme was established in June 2015 to help reduce early deaths and health inequalities for people with a learning disability by supporting local areas in England to review the deaths of people with a learning disability and to ensure that the learning from these reviews lead to improved health and care services.

The programme is led by the University of Bristol and commissioned by the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership (HQIP) on behalf of NHS England.

It finds that the quality of care offered to people with a learning disability sometimes falls short of the standards we expect. The existence of LeDeR programme testifies to our commitment to ensure that people with learning disabilities can access the best possible quality care and support.

Since the second LeDeR report was published in May 2018 the Government and its system partners have continued to make progress to implement the recommendations in that report.

To support delivery of the LeDeR programme in 2018-19, NHS England allocated an additional £1.4 million to support local areas to better establish their review programmes and reduce the backlog of reviews.

In November 2018, I wrote to health and social care employers to remind them of their statutory obligations in terms of staff training. We have also consulted on introducing mandatory learning disability and autism training to ensure that staff across health and social care have the right skills and knowledge to provide better support and will announce our next steps following analysis of the responses.
NHS England have also today published its ‘Action from Learning’ report, which highlights the considerable work underway which will have a positive impact on the safety and quality of care to reduce early deaths and health inequalities.

The third annual LeDeR report covers the period 1 July 2016-31 December 2018, with a particular focus on deaths in 2018. From 1 July 2016-31 December 2018, 4,302 “in-scope” deaths were notified to the LeDeR programme. The majority of these (2,926) were notified in 2018. In 71 of the cases reviewed, people received care that fell so far short of expected good practice that it significantly impacted on their well-being or directly contributed to their cause of death.

Based on the evidence from completed LeDeR reviews, the report makes twelve recommendations for the education, health and care system which include:

- Support for CCGs to ensure the timely completion of mortality reviews
- Support to recognise deteriorating health in people with learning disabilities
- Care co-ordination
- Transition planning for young people

I am particularly concerned at the evidence the review presents of occasional poor practice in doctors giving the fact that a person has a learning disability or Down’s syndrome, as a rationale for a Do Not Attempt Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (DNACPR) order. To address this, the NHS medical director has written to senior doctors and nurses, the British Medical Association and the medical royal colleges to ensure that doctors are reminded that a patient having a learning disability can never be an acceptable reason for a DNACPR and that they must avoid this form of discrimination. People with a learning disability have the same right to enjoy a meaningful life as anyone.

While the increase in the number of reviews carried out is welcome, we acknowledge that the pace with which reviews are conducted needs to increase. I am pleased that NHS England have today announced a further £5 million to speed up reviews to ensure that they are carried out as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

It is essential that we take all necessary actions to learn from the issues raised in the LeDeR report. We will consider the report and its recommendations in the coming weeks and consider the recommendations in due course.

In November 2018, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made a statement to the House of Commons following the reporting of the case of Bethany, a young autistic woman who was held in seclusion in hospital for too long.

Like everyone across the House, I have been moved by these individual cases and personal stories. I do not believe this is just about a few individual cases where things went wrong; this is about a system. A system across health, education, social care and criminal justice that needs to change.

We know there is good practice out there and excellent examples of staff working incredibly hard and supporting individuals and their families to receive the best possible care. We need to recognise and widely spread this practice so that it becomes the practice of all. However, there is variability and unacceptable practice. We must tackle this.

That is why the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care charged the Care Quality Commission (CQC) with undertaking a section 48 thematic review looking at the extent to which restrictive practice is being used in the NHS. This includes the use of segregation, prolonged seclusion and all forms of restraint: physical, mechanical or chemical.

We are adamant that no stone should remain unturned in identifying problems, poor practice and care which falls so far short of what we would expect for our own family.

The CQC is today publishing its interim report of this review, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House. This report makes difficult reading. It provides early findings and recommendations on the use of segregation on mental health wards for children and young people and on wards for autistic people and/or those with learning disabilities.

This is an interim report and as the CQC themselves describe there is much work that remains to be done in the rest of the review. However, the Government accept these recommendations in full and are committed to working with partners across the health, education and care system to ensure that they are implemented.

The model of care for autistic people and those with learning disabilities must be fit for purpose—we will convene an expert group for learning disabilities and autism, bringing together leading experts, including those from other countries, clinicians, academics, parents and carers and others, to develop a new care model taking the very best practice as the foundation.

We will ensure each and every case of seclusion and long term segregation is thoroughly scrutinised and that every element of their care has been reviewed. We are clear that every possible step must be taken to ensure people get the care, support and treatment they need. We will ensure that they have access to specialist independent advocacy to support them and their families.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The Government have made improving the care and treatment of autistic people and people with a learning disability a priority. Society is rightly judged on the way it treats its most vulnerable citizens.

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This is an interim report and as the CQC themselves describe there is much work that remains to be done in the rest of the review. However, the Government accept these recommendations in full and are committed to working with partners across the health, education and care system to ensure that they are implemented.

It is absolutely essential that we take all necessary actions to learn from the issues raised in this interim report:

We will ensure each and every case of seclusion and long term segregation is thoroughly scrutinised and that every element of their care has been reviewed. We are clear that every possible step must be taken to ensure people get the care, support and treatment they need. We will ensure that they have access to specialist independent advocacy to support them and their families.

The model of care for autistic people and those with learning disabilities must be fit for purpose—we will convene an expert group for learning disabilities and autism, bringing together leading experts, including those from other countries, clinicians, academics, parents and carers and others, to develop a new care model taking the very best practice as the foundation.

We will strengthen safeguards, addressing the lack of join up across the reviews of care that people receive and working the Care Quality Commission to bolster the oversight arrangements for hospitals that use segregation.

We will empower specialist advocates to raise concerns when they know something is not right. We will also develop a new awareness raising campaign, to encourage staff, families and friends to come forward if they have concerns about care.
Hon. Members will be aware of the recent allegations of abuse at Whorlton Hall, into which Durham Constabulary are now leading a criminal investigation.

These allegations of abuse have been treated with the utmost seriousness. Steps have been taken to ensure the safety of residents at Whorlton Hall.

Where people—staff, family and friends—have concerns about any service they must raise them.

We will ensure that we continue to make progress across the board on fostering a just and open culture around safety and raising concerns in the NHS.

We need to improve the quality of concerns handling and ensure that this is true for every patient. Working with the Health Ombudsman we will deliver a single vision for improving how the NHS responds when concerns or complaints are raised, whether concerns are raised by patients, families, advocates or staff.

The National Guardian and the local network of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are playing a crucial role across the country in providing safe avenues for staff to raise concerns within their own organisations. We will make it even easier for people to raise concerns about patient safety in the NHS by introducing a new digital reporting system.

Where it is essential that someone is supported at distance from home, we will make sure that those arrangements are adequately supervised. We cannot have people out of sight and out of mind. That is why we are introducing stronger oversight arrangements. Where someone with a learning disability or an autistic person is an inpatient out of area they will visited every six weeks if they are a child and every eight weeks if they are an adult, on site. The Host Clinical Commissioning Group will also be given new responsibilities to oversee and monitor the quality of care.

But we must be clear: improving the quality of specialist inpatient care is critical. But we are committed to stopping people from going into crisis and being admitted into specialist inpatient care in the first place.

For example, we know that autistic children often have a range of needs. They require support from education, health and social care. We must strengthen this join up. That is why we are reviewing our autism strategy and will be extending it to include children.

But we must be clear: improving the quality of specialist inpatient care is critical. But we are committed to stopping people from going into crisis and being admitted into specialist inpatient care in the first place.

We must ensure autistic children get the right support they need—at the right time—and as close to home as possible. By making our strategy all age we will look at how earlier intervention can stop escalating needs.

We know that autistic children and those with learning disabilities and their families can face difficulties when transitioning from child to adult services. We will continue to improve community services to support people appropriately from childhood into adulthood.

As part of the implementation of the NHS’s Long Term Plan there will be concerted effort in implementing arrangements to ensure that those at the highest risk of admission to a specialist hospital or other institutional setting are getting the help they need. We will ensure that every area has such ‘dynamic support registers’ in place.

We think all staff in every setting should have improved awareness of learning disability and autism. That is why, in the coming months, we will be setting out our response to our consultation on proposals to introduce mandatory training for all health and care staff.

We will continue to bring down inpatient numbers. We will take every step to take hold of the very best practice going on across the health and care system and make that the norm everywhere. There is no room for complacency.

NHS Accountability Framework

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I will today lay before Parliament the Government’s 2019-20 accountability framework with NHS England and NHS Improvement. For the first time, this combines the Government’s annual statutory mandate to NHS England with the annual remit set for NHS Improvement.

NHS England oversees the commissioning of health services in England and NHS Improvement oversees and holds to account NHS foundation trusts, NHS trusts, and independent providers of NHS-funded care. Working together they will play a vital role in leading the NHS as it takes forward its long term plan, which has been created in partnership with doctors, nurses, other clinicians and builds on the views and insights of patients and the public. They have come together under a joint senior leadership team to do this effectively and the Government are supporting them with a funding settlement that will see the NHS’s annual budget increase by £33.9 billion by 2023-24, the largest cash settlement in the history of the NHS.

This is an important year for the NHS as it transitions into full implementation of the NHS long term plan while at the same time ensuring that every patient in England will continue to receive vital services as the country leaves the EU. To put it beyond doubt that these are the most important things that the NHS has to deliver this year, the accountability framework sets NHS England and NHS Improvement two objectives for 2019-20: to ensure the effective delivery of the long term plan, and to support the Government in managing the effects of EU Exit on health and care.

The framework clearly demonstrates the Government’s commitment to NHS staff, to the public, to patients and to taxpayers, that the long term plan will be delivered and that the safety and quality of NHS services will be safeguarded through a period of change. As required by the Act, NHS England and Healthwatch England have been consulted on the objectives set in it, along with NHS Improvement.

NHS England and NHS Improvement are co-ordinating a system-wide process of implementation planning, at both local and national level. This will culminate in a national implementation programme for the long term plan to 2023-24, and an NHS workforce implementation plan, by the end of 2019. My intention is then to set a further accountability framework from 2020-21 to 2023-24 taking account of these, the outcome of our spending review, the needs of patients and the public, and the views of Government.

As in previous years, I will also today re-lay the mandate for 2018-19. This is to take account of in-year revisions to NHS England’s budget for 2018-19. There are no other changes.

[HCWS1570]
Grenfell Tower Site

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury for a contingent liability associated with the Government taking ownership of the Grenfell Tower site.

The Government have always been committed to working with the community to create a fitting memorial, with the Prime Minister giving her personal commitment that the bereaved, survivors and community will decide what happens to the long term future of the Grenfell Tower site.

I made a commitment in August 2018 that the Government would take responsibility for the Grenfell Tower site until the community has determined the long term future of the site. As part of this process, the Government have also committed to transferring the land to the bereaved and survivors if that is their wish, once an appropriate body has been established.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that MHCLG will hold as a result of the Government owning the site.

The unquantifiable contingent liability will remain for the duration of the Government’s ownership of the site. The Government will own the site until the community has determined the long term future use, and an appropriate body has been established, which I am advised could take up to five years.

If the liability is called against MHCLG, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

[HCWS1574]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingency Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has sought a repayable cash advance from the contingencies fund of £14,700,000 to ensure the CMA’s relocation to Canary Wharf remains on schedule.

The CMA will receive its voted funding for this project at the main estimate, and consequently may only draw the related cash from the consolidated fund after the Supply and Appropriation Act has received Royal Assent in July 2019. This requirement has arisen because the 2019-20 capital expenditure for the construction works at the CMA’s new offices at Cabot Square exceeds the vote on account for capital expenditure prior to Royal Assent. The requirement to include the voted funding in the main estimate was agreed after the vote on account for 2019-20 was approved.

The cash advance will ensure the project stays on track and on budget and ensure that the CMA also meets its operational needs.

Parliamentary approval for additional capital of £14,700,000 will be sought in the main estimate for the CMA. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £14,700,000 will be met by repayable cash advance from the contingencies fund.

[HCWS1576]

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Internal Market and Industry Day of the Competitiveness Council will take place on 27 May 2019. Katrina Williams, Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the European Union, will represent the UK.

The Research and Space Day of the Competitiveness Council will take place on 28 May 2019. Chris Skidmore MP, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, will represent the UK.

Day one—Internal Market and Industry

The Internal Market and Industry Day will consider a number of non-legislative items, including a competitiveness “check-up”. Attendees will be asked to debate and agree the adoption of conclusions on “a new level of ambition for a competitive single market” and “an EU industrial policy strategy: a vision for 2030”. This will be followed by the adoption of “conclusions on the competitiveness of the tourism sector as a driver for sustainable growth, jobs and social cohesion in the EU for the next decade”.

Under any other business, there will be updates on the following current legislative proposals: (a) the directive on cross-border conversions, mergers and divisions; (b) the directive on the modernisation of the EU consumer protection rules; (c) the directive on representative actions for the protection of the collective interests of consumers; and (d) the regulation on the general safety of vehicles.

The presidency will also provide information on better regulation and the forum dedicated to the auto industry. Finally, the Finnish delegation will provide information on the work programme of the incoming Finnish presidency.

Day two—Research and Space

The Research and Space Day of the Competitiveness Council will begin with a session on space, during which the Council will hold a policy debate on “strengthening Europe’s role as a global actor and promoting international co-operation, space diplomacy and contributing to building the global space governance”.

The Competitiveness Council will then break for the 280th European Space Agency (ESA) Council where the UK, as an ESA member state, will vote on the ESA resolution “space as an enabler”. The Council will then reconvene for the 9th EU-ESA Space Council where there will be an exchange of views and adoption of conclusions on “space as an enabler”.

The research session will start with a policy debate concerning “research and innovation as a driving force for a more competitive European Union”. Finally, the Finnish delegation will provide information on the work programme of the incoming Finnish presidency.

Register of Beneficial Owners of Overseas Entities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Our modern industrial strategy seeks to maintain the UK’s global reputation as a good place to do business. People come to Britain confident in our high corporate standards, including market transparency, which foster confidence and trust. Transactions are improved and the market has greater confidence when people know who they are doing business with, while lack of transparency can facilitate criminal behaviour.

The 2017 national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing highlights the fact that property continues to be an attractive vehicle for criminal investment, in particular for high-end money laundering. The risks relating to abuse of property are most acute where property is owned anonymously through corporate structures or trusts.

This Government committed at the 2016 international anti-corruption summit to create a register showing the beneficial owners of overseas entities which own or buy property in the UK. The Government also committed in primary legislation, through section 50 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, to report to Parliament annually on the progress that has been made towards putting in place such a register.

Over the past year, significant progress has been made towards the introduction of the register.
The Government published a draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill on 23 July 2018 and invited comment on it from interested parties. Some 29 responses were received from civil society groups, the property sector and others, which has informed the development of the register. The draft Bill and explanatory notes set out how the register will operate.

A Joint Committee was appointed to consider and report on the draft Bill. The Commons members of the Committee were appointed on 19 February 2019. The Lords members were appointed on 25 February 2019. The Committee held a number of evidence sessions, including one on 25 March 2019 at which I gave evidence. They also invited interested individuals and organisations to submit written evidence to their inquiry.

The Committee made recommendations in a report to both Houses, published on 20 May 2019. The Government welcome the Committee’s thorough and helpful scrutiny of the Bill. We are considering their recommendations and will publish a response in due course.

The Government intend that the register will be operational with Royal Assent and the making of secondary legislation, including our delivery partners, in developing secondary legislation of its kind in the world. The Act provided a transparency in supply chains statement this year, to set out the steps we are taking through public procurement to prevent the risks of modern slavery in our supply chains. We are also working with international partners to drive action to address modern slavery risks in supply chains and public procurement.

We continue to play a leadership role internationally, pushing for co-ordinated action to deliver the sustainable development goals on modern slavery, supported by a commitment of £200 million of UK aid, as well as building partnerships with countries from where the UK receives high numbers of victims. To build on this work, the Government recently awarded a further £5 million in grants to seven organisations through the modern slavery innovation fund to trial new and innovative approaches to tackle this heinous crime.

However, this Government are not complacent, and we are determined to lead global efforts to eradicate modern slavery, particularly as the methods used by criminals to exploit vulnerable people and our understanding of the crime evolves. That is why in July 2018 I commissioned right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the noble Baroness Butler-Sloss GBE to conduct an independent review of the Modern Slavery Act. The review considered four themes relating to provisions in the Act: the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, transparency in supply chains, legal application and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. The final report has made a total of 80 recommendations.

I am grateful to the reviewers and all those who contributed to the review for their commitment and comprehensive analysis. The Government intend to consider all recommendations in depth, before making a formal response in summer 2019.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today I am laying before the House the final report of the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (CP 100). Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office and it will also be published at: www.gov.uk.

Under the leadership of the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the UK has transformed its response to modern slavery over the last five years. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was the first legislation of its kind in the world. The Act provided law enforcement with new tools and powers to apprehend perpetrators, new duties on businesses to publish transparency in supply chains statements, enhanced protections for victims and created the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner role. The impact of the Act is evident: more victims than ever before are being identified and supported, more offenders are being prosecuted and convicted and thousands of companies have published transparency statements and are taking action to prevent slavery and trafficking in their supply chains.

Alongside the Act, this Government are delivering a comprehensive programme of policy measures to tackle modern slavery. We are reforming the national referral mechanism (NRM) to improve the support available to victims and to streamline the decision-making process. We are continuing to hold businesses to account on their obligations to publish transparency statements and central Government Departments will publish a transparency in supply chains statement this year, to set out the steps we are taking through public procurement to prevent the risks of modern slavery in our supply chains.

We continue to play a leadership role internationally, pushing for co-ordinated action to deliver the sustainable development goals on modern slavery, supported by a commitment of £200 million of UK aid, as well as building partnerships with countries from where the UK receives high numbers of victims. To build on this work, the Government recently awarded a further £5 million in grants to seven organisations through the modern slavery innovation fund to trial new and innovative approaches to tackle this heinous crime.

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I am grateful to the reviewers and all those who contributed to the review for their commitment and comprehensive analysis. The Government intend to consider all recommendations in depth, before making a formal response in summer 2019.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The EU Trade Foreign Affairs Council will take place in Brussels on 27 May 2019.

The substantive items on 27 May will be: non-legislative items: the state of play of World Trade Organisation modernisation and negotiations, the state of play of EU-US trade relations, and an exchange of views on preparation for signature of the EU-Vietnam free trade agreement and investment protection agreement.

the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill to Parliament, which will pave the way for the sentencing code. The Law Commission’s draft sentencing code is a consolidation of legislation governing sentencing procedure which aims to ensure that the law relating to sentencing procedure is readily comprehensible and operates within a clear framework as efficiently as possible. For the code to operate as intended, there are some amendments required to the existing law to facilitate the consolidation and to remove historic, and now redundant, layers of legislation. To enable this the Law Commission has also drafted a pre-consolidation amendment bill. Neither the code nor the pre-consolidation amendments make any changes to existing offences and penalties, nor do they introduce any new substantive law or sentencing disposals.

The key recommendation of the report is that the draft legislation be enacted. The Government welcome the Law Commission’s report and draft legislation and consider the consolidation of sentencing procedure to be a major step forward in simplifying what is often a complex and technical area of law. It is absolutely vital that unnecessary errors made in our criminal justice system are minimised, and that the courts, offenders, and victims of crime and their families are not put through the time and expense of unnecessary appeals.

The Ministry of Justice is looking carefully at substantive sentencing reform. For example, there is persuasive evidence showing that community sentences, in certain circumstances, are more effective than short custodial sentences in reducing reoffending, and therefore keeping the public safe. At this stage, we are still considering options and have not ruled anything in or out.

However, questions of substantive reform are distinct from the important task of making sure that sentencing procedural law is clear and accessible to those that need to use it. We believe the sentencing code provides that clarity and transparency. I will bring forward more detailed proposals in due course, but I emphasise that the opportunity for the consolidation of complex sentencing procedural law presented by the code is a separate matter, and should be brought forward separately.

The Law Commission has also made some further recommendations to the Government for the reform of sentencing law. These have not been given effect in the draft legislation and both Bills as drafted by the Law Commission can be enacted without taking these additional recommendations forward. The Government are grateful for the in-depth analysis that has gone into these complex issues during consultation, acknowledging that in some cases they were unsuitable for inclusion as part of the consolidation process or outside the terms of reference for the project. For those reasons, we do not propose that these recommendations be taken forward at this time, while noting that the benefit of the sentencing code is that it will be readily open to Parliament in future to make such changes. We will, however, provide a fuller response to these further recommendations raised by the Law Commission in due course.

The Government thank the Law Commission for the considerable effort that has gone into producing the report and draft legislation. While the sentencing code itself should be brought forward through the parliamentary procedure for Law Commission consolidation Bills, I am pleased to announce that the Government will be introducing the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill to Parliament, giving effect to the pre-consolidation amendments, through the special procedure which is available for Law Commission recommended Bills.
Thursday 23 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingent Liability Notification: British Steel

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Today I lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability arising from an indemnity for the official receiver acting in the insolvency of British Steel Limited.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute, giving details of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

British Steel Limited entered into liquidation on 22 May 2019. The official receiver has been appointed as liquidator and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has provided him with an indemnity in respect of:

- carrying out the proper performance of the official receiver’s duties as liquidator of the company; and
- maintaining, securing and funding the ongoing operation of the company’s undertaking, and distributing the assets of the company in the ordinary course of the official receiver’s duties as liquidator of the company.

It has not been possible to observe the usual waiting period for this contingent liability, since it only materialised when the company entered into liquidation yesterday morning.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. [HCWS1585]

TREASURY

Financial Conduct Authority Investigation: London Capital and Finance

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I have today laid a direction before Parliament requiring the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to carry out an independent investigation into the events and circumstances surrounding the failure and placing into administration of London Capital & Finance Plc (LCF), using powers under Sections 77 and 78 of the Financial Services Act 2012.

Following a request from the FCA, I announced on 1 April the Government’s intention to direct the FCA to launch an investigation into the events at LCF and the circumstances surrounding them. Today’s direction orders this investigation and sets out the terms on which it will be carried out.

The direction requires the FCA to appoint an independent person to carry out the investigation on its behalf, with the approval of HM Treasury. I have approved the FCA’s appointment of Dame Elizabeth Gloster to carry out the investigation on its behalf. The investigation is expected to run for 12 months.

The investigation will look at the actions, policies and approach of the FCA, as the institution with statutory responsibility for the authorisation and supervision of LCF during the relevant period. It will focus on whether the FCA discharged its functions in a manner which enabled it to effectively fulfil its statutory objectives, and may consider any other matter deemed relevant for this purpose.

This independent investigation is separate to the investigation by the Serious Fraud Office, working in conjunction with the FCA, into individuals associated with LCF.

I have also announced today that, alongside this independent investigation, the Government will separately review the wider policy questions raised by the case. This will include research into the wider market for non-transferable securities, such as mini bonds, and their role in the economy. The Treasury will begin work alongside this to consider the regulatory arrangements currently in place for the issuance of these investments, including the financial promotions order which governs the marketing of those products.

The Government are committed to creating a stronger and safer financial system. The independent investigation into the supervision of LCF will ensure that the events and circumstances surrounding the collapse of LCF are better understood. Its findings will help to properly protect those who invest their money in the future.

Copies of the direction are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office. [HCWS1584]

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 17 May 2019. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 16 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers then discussed the possibility of the European Investment Bank developing country strategies. Lastly, the Commission updated on the state of play on negotiations on the definitive system of value added tax.

Excise duties

The Council discussed the directive on general arrangements for excise duty (recast), the regulation on administrative co-operation of the content of electronic registers, and the directive on the structures of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages.
**Current financial services legislative proposals**

The Romanian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

**International meetings**

The Council held an exchange of views on digital taxation in the international context, and the presidency and Commission updated the Council on the outcomes of the G20, IMF and World Bank spring meetings that took place in April. The Council then mandated the Economic and Financial Committee to approve the terms of reference for the upcoming G20 meeting in June. Lastly, the Finnish delegation debriefed the Council on the first meeting of the Finance Ministers coalition for climate action.

**European semester**

The Council adopted conclusions on the outcomes of the 2019 in-depth reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure; and the implementation of 2018 country-specific recommendations.

**Institutional cycle priorities**

Under the non-legislative AOB, the presidency informed the Council on the follow-up discussions in regards to priorities for the next institutional cycle in the ECOFIN area.

**Working lunch**

Following on from the discussions at April informal ECOFIN in Bucharest, EU Finance Ministers held a working lunch to discuss the challenges of labour mobility and their potential solutions, followed by an exchange of views on the way forward in areas of the economic and monetary union, specifically in regards to the reform support programme.

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**FCO Services**

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): FCO Services operates as a trading fund of the FCO. I have set it the following performance targets for 2019-20:

1. Achievement of a return on capital employed of at least 3.5% (statutory commitment)
2. A productivity ratio of at least 80%, measuring actual billable hours vs. available billable hours
3. In-year customer satisfaction results averaging at least 80%
4. A Your Say score for “Employee Engagement” of at least 60%
5. An average Your Say score for “My Manager” of at least 63%

FCO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2019-20.

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Planning: Mineral Resources**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On the 6 March 2019, Mr Justice Dove handed down his judgment in the case of Stephenson v SoS MHCLG [2019] EWHC 519 (Admin). In accordance with the terms of the court order, paragraph 209 (a) of the national planning policy framework has been quashed.

For the avoidance of doubt the remainder of the national planning policy framework policies and, in particular, chapter 17 on “facilitating the sustainable use of minerals” remain unchanged and extant.

For the purposes of the national planning policy framework, hydrocarbon development (including unconventional oil and gas) are considered to be a mineral resource. Specific policy on the planning considerations associated with their development is set out at paragraphs 203-205 and the remainder of 209 of the national planning policy framework. In particular, paragraph 204 (a) of the national planning policy framework states that planning policies should “provide for the extraction of mineral resources of local and national importance” with paragraph 205 stating that “[w]hen determining planning applications, great weight should be given to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy”.

In addition, the written ministerial statements of 16 September 2015 on ‘shale gas and oil policy’ and 17 May 2018 on ‘planning and energy policy’ also remain unchanged and extant. The written ministerial statements sit alongside the national planning policy framework. Planning practice guidance is also unaffected by the ruling.

This suite of policies and guidance remain material considerations in plan making and decision taking for hydrocarbon development and they should be afforded appropriate weighting as determined by the decision maker.

We remain committed to the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Maintenance of stroke services at Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother Hospital Margate

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Thanet,

Declares that the Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital (QEQM) in Margate is much valued by local residents and is the only regional general hospital servicing the population of Thanet and the north and east Kent coastal communities; further that the Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups for the Kent and Medway Stroke Review have concluded that stroke services at the QEQM will be closed in favour of three Hyper-acute Stroke Units to serve Kent and Medway with Darent Valley, Maidstone and Ashford hospitals being the preferred future sites, this will leave local residents with a journey time of an hour to the nearest hospital to receive stroke care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reference back to the Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups for the Kent and Medway Stroke Review have concluded that stroke services at the QEQM will be closed in favour of three Hyper-acute Stroke Units to serve Kent and Medway with Darent Valley, Maidstone and Ashford hospitals being the preferred future sites, this will leave local residents with a journey time of an hour to the nearest hospital to receive stroke care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reference back to the Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee in Kent to ensure that the outcome thus far presented is credible and soundly based and whether the maintenance of stroke services at QEQM would not be the better option for local clinical care.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Craig Mackinlay, Official Report, 19 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 1180.]

[PO02442]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy):

The reconfiguration of services is a matter for the local NHS. It is right that these matters are addressed at a level where the local healthcare needs are best understood rather than in Whitehall. The proposed service change has recently been referred to the Secretary of State who will decide whether to refer the matter to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel for Investigation.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local facilities on the Hull Boothferry Estate

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom.

Declares that the facilities on the Boothferry Estate in Hull are woefully inadequate and need to be improved, notes that there is only a single pharmacy to support a population of 3028 and further notes that Hull City Council has lost one pound in every three from its budget since this government came to office in 2010.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to release more money to Hull City Council to improve local facilities on the Boothferry Estate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Hardy, Official Report, 8 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 146.]

[PO02445]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

Local authorities are democratically elected organisations and so are independent from central Government. They are responsible for managing their financial budgets and for making spending decisions in line with their priority needs. The issue of local authority spending priorities is ultimately a matter for local discretion.

All of Government have had to make savings to help deliver our deficit reduction programme. The Government’s approach is working and we are seeing positive signs for the future, but we know demand on services is increasing. As announced in the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2019-20, there is a cash-terms increase of 2.8% funding for English councils; rising from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20. Hull City Council has £214.6 million available for 2019-20, an increase of 2.4% on 2018-19.

The overall level of future funding available for local government will be a matter for the spending review. This is our opportunity to look at Local Government spending in the round; and I want to ensure that councils have the resources and flexibilities to deliver efficiently and effectively.

Community Pharmacies are private businesses and make their own business decisions on whether or not to open. Market entry is governed by legislation that requires local authorities to carry out a pharmaceutical needs assessment and the local NHS England team to have consideration of that assessment when considering applications to join the pharmaceutical list to provide NHS services in an area.

The Government protect patient access to pharmaceutical services through the Pharmacy Access Scheme which tops up pharmacy incomes for those pharmacies that are 1 mile from their next nearest pharmacy and dispensed less than 109,012 prescriptions in 2015/16, the year when eligibility was determined. The Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment for Hull states that the provision of pharmaceutical services in the Boothferry Ward is considered adequate by the local authority.

TRANSPORT

Closure of Suggitts Lane Level Crossing, Cleethorpes

The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire.

Declares that the proposed closure of the level crossing (number 42, O.S. Grid ref. TA300097) at Suggitts Lane Level Cleethorpes by National Rail is at this time not considered adequate by the local authority.

This is our opportunity to look at Local Government spending in the round; and I want to ensure that councils have the resources and flexibilities to deliver efficiently and effectively.

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health and disability reasons are unable to use the footbridge) being denied access to the Sea Front and Local Amenities.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons urges to instruct Network Rail to consult with users of the crossing in order to establish a viable plan to keep the crossing open.


Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):

The UK has one of the safest railways in Europe, but this Government strive to ensure that safety continues to be improved. Level crossings remain one of the most significant risks to public safety on the railway network and it is therefore right that, where justified and practicable, they are closed to eliminate this risk. However, this should not be at the expense of local community access to both sides of the railway.

I am well aware of the complex issues surrounding Suggitt’s Lane level crossing and the depth of feeling in the local community. Whilst it remains the responsibility of Network Rail, as the infrastructure manager for the railway, to take the decision on whether to close the private crossing, I have urged it to arrange a meeting at the earliest opportunity between all parties that have an interest in Suggitt’s Lane. I have made it clear that this meeting should include North East Lincolnshire Council, local residents’ representatives and, of course, Network Rail itself. This should provide an opportunity for the concerns of the local community to be considered. I hope that this meeting will enable all parties to agree a solution that addresses both the safety and accessibility issues relating to Suggitt’s Lane.
Petition

Monday 20 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The regulation of the Hair, Barber and Beauty industries

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that based upon recent research from industry, stakeholders and the general public, (upwards of 84% average of all respondents), there is a strong need and desire to amend this Act of Parliament from voluntary to that of mandatory; further that currently the hair, barber and beauty industries are completely unregulated which the public and industry find totally unacceptable and not in line with protecting the public from untrained and unqualified practitioners, including cases of poor health, safety and hygiene standards; further that with the current modern day slavery issues together with the use of precursor chemicals used in the making of incendiary devices, by giving industry the tools to self-regulate, we can make a huge contribution to challenging and stamping out these illegal and dangerous practices.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to amend this Act of Parliament to that of ‘Mandatory’ while including Beauty into the body of the ‘Act’, thus allowing industry to self-regulate with the remit to raise the standards of quality and training within the industry, whilst also raising the perception of the industry with the general public and protecting them from any form of malpractice; the petitioners further request that the Hair and Barber Council be consulted when amending this Act.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John McNally, Official Report, 12 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 312.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government recognise the petitioner’s request to amend the Hairdressers (Registration) Act 1964 (‘the Act’) to make state registration mandatory, and to include ‘Beauty’ into the body of Act.

To amend the Act would require demonstrating a market failure which needs regulatory intervention. It would also require an impact assessment that demonstrates a benefit to the public that is greater than the cost to business.

The Small and Micro Businesses policy requires that small and micro businesses be exempt from new regulatory measures where possible. There are approximately 42,000 hair and beauty businesses in the UK employing around 260,000 people. 93% of the businesses employ less than 10 people, 70% less than five people. As the majority of the industry falls within the small and micro business classification, we believe that mandatory registration would prevent the policy aims being achieved.

The petition also highlights ‘cases of poor health and safety issues as well as hygiene, and the control of dangerous substances’. These areas are already highly regulated by health and safety legislation, enforced by local authority environmental health departments.

We would therefore encourage the hair and beauty industry to come together to formulate and agree measures—including alternatives to regulation—needed to drive up the standards of exemplary customer service and wellbeing in this vibrant and valued sector.
Petition

Wednesday 22 May 2019

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Non-stun slaughter

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that animals killed by having their throats cut while fully conscious is unacceptable; further that animals should not be made to suffer such profound trauma in the name of religion; further that this method of slaughter runs counter to any belief in compassion and mercy; further that animals should be stunned before they are slaughtered; further that, Shechita slaughter does not allow animals to be stunned before they are slaughtered; further that, when the Holy Prophet was alive, modern stunning methods did not exist; further that the Food Research Institute states that killing an animal before it is bled out by high voltage electrical stunning does not affect the amount of blood from the carcass; and further that this petition relates to e-petition 131591.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to debate non-stun slaughter.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002456]
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 14 May 2019

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Topical Questions on 8 April 2019.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Lack of knowledge of the armed forces covenant and of joined-up working in some cases is one of the key barriers to veterans getting the help that they need. What more can we do to increase joined-up working and awareness?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend will have to excuse me for turning my back—there are not too many daggers in it today. We have been asking councils to nominate a senior councillor in every single council to be a veterans’ champion. I will audit that and ensure that it happens. The Veterans Board—the inter-ministerial Government board—meets regularly; in fact, we have our next meeting in only about three weeks’ time. [Official Report, 8 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 22.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove).

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend will have to excuse me for turning my back—there are not too many daggers in it today. We have been encouraging councils to nominate a senior councillor in every single council to be an armed forces champion. I will ask local authorities to let us know who has been appointed. The Veterans Board—the inter-ministerial Government board—meets regularly; in fact, we have our next meeting in only about three weeks’ time.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 16 May 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Credit Changes

The following is an extract from a Westminster Hall debate on Pension Credit Changes on 24 April 2019.

Ruth George: When the changes were debated back in 2012 as part of the Welfare Reform Act, universal credit was still a similar level of benefit to tax credits. Since then, following the 2015 budgetary changes, universal credit has been worth significantly less, and increased numbers of people on universal credit are in poverty. Does the Minister not agree that that should be a reason for Parliament to debate again the changes that will affect hundreds of thousands more, often vulnerable, households, in the light of the changed circumstances?

Guy Opperman: With respect, Parliament has debated the matter and made a decision. The hon. Lady will be aware of the 2011 equality impact assessment, the 2012 risk assessment, the universal credit impact assessment, and the ad hoc statistical analysis that was published on 28 February, which outlined the number of people affected, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned—approximately 115,000 mixed-age couples in Great Britain.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health

The following is an extract from my reply to an Opposition day debate on Health on 14 May 2019.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about local mental health provision and the experience of his young constituent. NHS England’s planned spend on mental health in the year ending 2019 was just over £12 billion. For children’s mental health services, it is nearly £7 billion—an increase of 5.6% on the previous year. I would like to reassure him that we are definitely not aiming for a one-size-fits-all service.


Letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy):

An error has been identified in my reply to the debate. The correct wording should have been:

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about local mental health provision and the experience of his young constituent. NHS England’s planned spend on mental health in the year ending 2019 was just over £12 billion. For children’s mental health services, it is nearly £700 million—an increase of 5.6% on the previous year. I would like to reassure him that we are definitely not aiming for a one-size-fits-all service.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 20 May 2019

WALES
Policing

The following is an extract from Wales Questions on 15 May 2019.

Susan Elan Jones: I welcome the Minister to his place, but I wish he would not just regurgitate Tory twaddle. When the National Audit Office makes it clear that central Government funding to police has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010-11, and when the cross-party Home Affairs Committee makes it clear that the funding structure is not fit for purpose, can we have some action? Can we have some standing up for Wales instead of the vacuous nonsense we get from this Tory Government?

Kevin Foster: It has to be said that anyone who wants to hear vacuous nonsense can just listen to those sort of attacks in the Chamber. Let us be clear: in 2015-16, the combined budget for North Wales police was £139.8 million; in 2019-20, it will be £155.8 million. That shows the increase in funding that is going on. Three out of the four forces in Wales are rated good for effectiveness, which is the subject of the main question.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
Leaving the EU: Expenditure

The following is an extract from Exiting the European Union questions on Thursday 16 May 2019.

17. Mr McFadden: How much Government Departments have spent on preparations for leaving the EU without a deal.

James Cleverly: Additional EU exit funding allocated by Her Majesty’s Treasury to Departments and devolved Administrations covers all scenarios. No-deal spending cannot readily be separated from deal spending, given the significant overlap in plans in many cases. Since 2016, the Treasury has allocated more than £4.2 billion of funding for all exit scenarios.

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly):

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

The correct response should have been:

James Cleverly: Additional EU exit funding allocated by Her Majesty’s Treasury to Departments and devolved Administrations covers all scenarios. No-deal spending cannot readily be separated from deal spending, given the significant overlap in plans in many cases. Since 2016, the Treasury has allocated more than £4.2 billion of funding for all exit scenarios.